MAGIC
THE GATHERING

MAGIC: THE GATHERING

# THE PHYREXIAN ARC

"Magic: The Gathering - The Phyrexian Arc"
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MAGIC
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# KALDHEIM

By Roy Graham

# EPISODE I
# Travelers

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THE PLANESWALKER KAYA HUNTS A TERRIFYING MONSTER
ON THE VIKING PLANE OF KALDHEIM.

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*"Mistgate Pathway", by Yeong-Hao Han.*

They came in ships like nothing the villagers of Sevalgr had seen before. Long and trim, inscribed with tales of glorious battle and cunning victory, gliding over the waves like the drakes and serpents carved into their prows. They were nothing like the meager fishing boats, which provided the sole source of food for the village now that they could no longer go into the forest.

Neither were the men and women aboard these ships shrunken, bent by hunger and fear, as the people of Sevalgr were; even the greybeard who accompanied them, the one with the raven on his shoulder, didn't seem to lean too heavily on his walking stick. They wore hoods and scarves, fishskin jerkins, armor—though nothing that would drag them to the bottom of the sea if they were to fall into the water. Their bodies were tattooed with navigational maps. There could be no mistaking them. Omenseekers.

The hersir invited them into the longhall, where he had put together as well a meal as they could offer the travelers. Such was tradition in Kaldheim; you never knew when the stranger at your door was one of the gods in disguise. But the clan leader—the blind woman, who somehow needed no help navigating the narrow, muddy streets—declined the offer. They were not here for salted fish and hard tack.



"When did the disappearances start?" she asked. None of the villagers had ever met Inga Rune-Eyes, the clan leader of the Omenseekers, but her strange white gaze left no doubt as to whom they spoke.

"They aren't disappearances, they're murders," said one woman, near the front of the crowd that had assembled. She had lost two daughters over the last month.

"You don't know that!" shouted another man, his eyes sunken and red from weeping. He'd lost his husband.

"You haven't found any bodies," said Inga, gently. "Is that right?"

Both nodded stiffly.

"No bodies. But one of the hunters saw it," said the hersir.

"Saw what?" asked Inga.

"Go on, Hras," said the alderman. "Tell them."

A young man stepped forward, no older than sixteen. In one of the braziers, a coal snapped with sparks; he flinched at the noise.

"Boy, what did you see?" asked Inga. Slowly, so as not to alarm the lad. "What is doing this to your town?"

He rubbed at his arms, as if cold. Refused to look up at her. “A monster. It was a monster.”

If Inga was surprised, she didn’t show it. “Asi,” she said, waving over the old man with the bird, “I want a war party ready to set off within the hour. Skeleton crews aboard the ships until we return. Everyone who can be spared is going into the Aldergard forest.”

The old man, who had been nodding intently until then, paused. “And your. . .guest? Will she be coming as well?”



*“Inga Rune Eyes”, by Bram Sels.*



The villagers had seen her, of course. That woman in strange garb, loitering by the ships while the Omenseekers took down sails and secured their vessels to the aging Sevalgr docks. The one who looked at them like they were curiosities pulled from the depths.

“Kaya?” said Rune-Eyes. “All this was her idea in the first place.”

Yeah, fine—it had been her idea. Journey into the wilderness, slay the terrible beast that’s been eating up townsfolk. It seemed like the kind of thing heroes did, and she supposed she was a hero now. It didn’t hurt that she was getting paid for it, though she certainly wished she knew who was paying her. But anonymous coin, minted from half a dozen different planes, was hard to argue with, and as an added benefit, it seemed nice and simple. Nothing like that messy business on Ravnica.

It was all going according to plan so far, only she didn’t count on the wilderness being so. . .wild. Kaya was used to the solidity of cobblestones underfoot, the press of a crowd around her. She was used to noise. Out here, in the Aldergard, each crunching footstep in the snow seemed to echo out between the massive pines for miles. She’d had a persistent case of goosebumps since they set off, and not just from the cold.

“Is this place always so quiet? I’ve been in tombs that were livelier,” she said when they stopped for a moment of rest under the branches of the great trees above.

The old man—Asi, he'd said his name was—raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps a lively tomb is not so rare, when one is a hunter of spirits."

"You may have a point." Inga, leader of the Omenseekers, was the first person Kaya had met on this plane, and she seemed a good enough sort. Hard to get to know, though—she always seemed distracted, as if talking to you was dragging her attention away from something more pressing. The old man, she'd found, was better company.

"The Aldergard is an old and strange place. The Omenseekers are legendary explorers, but even they seldom travel this far into the forest. Too far from the sea, from their ships. Inga Rune-Eyes has sight beyond most mortals; she has knowledge of every location to which her clan members have gone. Even she knows little of this place, though."

"Strange, old—I get all that. Still would have expected to see some animals. A squirrel, at least. You have those here, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, Toski, the messenger of the gods, is a great cousin of the common squirrel. There are many stories of him scampering about the branches of the World Tree, delivering news across the many realms of Kaldheim."

He had that voice Kaya associated with doddering grandfathers, but she had to remind herself that these "stories" probably weren't far off from the truth. She'd seen the branches of the World Tree herself in the



skies of Bretagard—hanging there, massive beyond reckoning, disappearing behind the passing clouds. A giant squirrel. Well, why not? She had seen stranger.

"It is unusual, though, to go so long in these woods without a sign of life. Almost as if the birds and beasts mean to avoid this place," said Asi.

"Maybe they've got better sense than us."

"You would be surprised how many do."

"People taken in the night"—an Omenseeker began muttering near them. The fear was plain in his voice—"at the edge of the woods, like sheep. You heard what that hunter said—he saw a monster. What if this isn't just some overgrown beast?"

"What are you suggesting it is we're tracking, young man?" said Asi.

"Sarulf," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, as if speaking the name might cause the thing suddenly to appear. "The Dread-Wolf. The Realm Eater."

"A wolf? That's what has you jumping at every snowflake?" said Kaya.

"Sarulf is no ordinary animal," said Asi. "He is one of the Cosmos Monsters. Created at the birth of the world, dwelling in the void between the realms. He would be a mighty foe to face indeed—but I wouldn't worry,"



*"Kaya the Inexorable", by Tyler Jacobson.*



said Asi. "It isn't the way of such beings to lurk and linger in the dark corners of the Aldergard. Were they to come to Bretagard, they would not do so in secret."

From the bows above them came a harsh caw. Kaya's hand went to one of the daggers at her belt. A raven wheeled in a circle above them, dropping lower and lower, black wings stark against the snow-white sky.

"Ah," said Asi. "Hakka's back."

It landed on his arm, then hopped to his shoulder, where it seemed to lean close to his ear. Kaya heard nothing, only saw the bird's beak opening and closing, the old man cocking his head thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "my friend may have found us a lead."

It looked, to Kaya, exactly like the sort of place to find a monster. Ahead of their party, the mouth of the cave yawned wide and dark. What faint light made its way through the cloud cover and forest canopy didn't reach beyond the first few steps. In front of the cave, the snow was marred by a long streak of blood and dirt; something had been dragged inside.

Quietly, hands on their weapons, the Omenseekers whispered little prayers to their gods. Kaya couldn't say she blamed them; to be honest, she wished she had a few gods to pray to just then. Monster hunting. Whose bright idea had that been, anyway?

*Oh, right,* she thought. *Mine.*

"Are you ready, Kaya?" asked Inga. She had no weapon of her own; only a lantern, lit with a flickering blue flame. Funny that she was the one carrying their light source. "You have traveled long and far to get here."

"Yeah, well. Guess we'd better get on with it," she said. With much more confidence than she really felt, Kaya stepped inside.

It was warmer in the cave. That was something, at least; Kaya could let the heavy furs she'd been wrapped in all this time slip a little looser. Together, she and the Omenseekers crept forward, each scuff of boots on stone or steel on leather seeming to reverberate past them into the depths. Soon, even the weak light of the surface was gone, and the azure beam of Inga's lantern was all they had to part the darkness. As it swept over one portion of the cave wall, something glittered.

"Wait," said Kaya. "Bring that light back."

In the lantern beam, Kaya was sure of it: veins of some kind of metal ran along the wall and ceiling of the cave. It didn't resemble any mineral she'd ever seen, though. In places, it seemed to fork into webbed, root-like fractals, forming a broad latticework over the stone.

"Was there ever a mine here?" she asked.

"No," murmured Inga. "This place should be barren rock."



"Well, it's pretty obviously not. Not anymore."

Next to her, one of the Omenseekers reached out toward the wall. Kaya caught his wrist. "I wouldn't touch that."

He pulled back his hand. "Why not?"

"Call it a hunch."

Wordlessly, they kept moving. Hard to say how long they spent shuffling forward, the dark on all sides seeming to press the breath out of them. It felt like a long, long time—hours, not minutes—so that when the passage finally opened up into a wide chamber, the earthen ceiling disappearing above them into darkness, it would have felt like relief. Would have, if not for what they saw at the center of the cave chamber.

At first, Kaya thought the hulking figure hunched over the carcass of a dire bear was simply eating. The wet choking noises, the sound of meat tearing from bone, all supported this theory. But when Inga's lantern beam swept over the creature and it turned to face them, Kaya could see that it wasn't quite right—the monster's arms were embedded in the bear's side, somehow fused with its flesh. With an awful popping sound, Kaya watched as the monster ripped itself free.

"That," hissed Kaya, "is *not* a wolf."

It stood twelve feet, maybe higher, its body a raw pinkish-red color. Across its shoulders was a ruff of patchy fur, a dozen different hues swirled together. The arms that had been sunken into the bear looked long and powerful, ending in horrible, curving talons. Two additional spindly arms extended from its chest, clawed hands twitching like spiders. All strange, but nothing as strange as its head; a skull-like face flanked by razor tusks and broad, spined antlers, all of it the color of bone, even as it gleamed like metal in the light of Inga's lantern.

It opened its mouth, red sinews working beneath its plated mask, and made a noise that scared Kaya in a way no spirit ever had—like a bear's roar, but wrong. *A bad imitation.* Then it dropped into a loping charge straight for them.

Kaya leapt out of the way, rolling across the cave floor and coming up with her daggers in hand. Two of the Omenseekers hadn't been so quick; one was pinned beneath the creature, screaming as the spindly arms sank into his face as if his flesh were only water. The other struggled as he was lifted in one monstrous hand.

It was a horrifying display, enough to send lesser warriors fleeing in terror, and the Omenseekers were not really warriors at heart. Traveling with them from the Kirda Pillars, Kaya had learned what it was that really drove them forward: the thrill of exploration, of discovery. They were



willing to fight, as part of this, but they never relished it. To their credit, though, none of them turned and ran. *Not like they'd get far,* she thought.

Forming a semicircle around the monster, several jabbed spears at it while others hacked at its outstretched limbs with sword and axe, opening great bloody gashes with each swing.

"Don't touch it!" shouted Kaya over the screaming of the trapped man, until something cut him off with a wet gurgle.

Before her eyes, the wounds seemed to knit shut, muscles welding themselves back together. From a particularly deep gash, whipping tendrils snaked out, latching on to one swordswoman's arm and dragging her shoulder-deep into the monster's flesh. Stuck there, she drew a knife from her belt and stabbed at the horrible creature over and over until it released her. She fell to the ground, clutching her arm and screaming in pain.

*It's not enough to cut the meat,* thought Kaya, willing energy into her knives. She had to cut deeper.

The creature pounced again, its wounds already sealed. For all its muscle and bulk, it moved with terrifying speed. Before another blow could land, though, its talons slowed, then stopped cold a foot from a flinching axeman. There was a blue aura surrounding its arm, Kaya realized, and it seemed to be growing denser before her eyes, hardening into a translucent kind of crystal. Kaya followed the light back to its source: Inga's

lantern. As the creature dragged and strained against the stasis spell, Inga's face twisted with effort.

*Not bad,* thought Kaya. Now was her chance. Kaya lunged forward, her dagger vibrating with magic, and swiped straight through the monster's trapped arm, lopping it off at the shoulder. Flesh, bone, spirit—if it could be severed, she had severed it.

The arm hit the stone floor of the cavern with a wet thud and began to blacken and crumble to ash where Kaya had cut it. The creature roared again, that bear-sound mingling with something underneath—a noise like the grinding of metal. As it twisted in pain, the dead Omenseeker, still melded to its smaller front claws, flopped about, limp as a fish.

With a motion sickeningly like an embrace, the monster pressed the limp man into its body. He disappeared into the raw pink flesh, slowly absorbed. Then, from the stump where its arm had once been, another began to grow. It happened with remarkable speed—the muscles tying themselves together, the talons hardening from a juvenile translucence to a hard black edge in the few seconds she was held transfixed by the horrid spectacle. Finished, it flexed one complete hand, something quietly popping into place, before turning those empty eye sockets toward her.

*Oh, gods and monsters,* thought Kaya. Then it charged.



She ducked under its first swipe and turned her torso to ghostly aether so the second passed right through. *I can hurt it at least semi-permanently,* she thought. *That's something.* Now she just had to find another opening in which to strike, a moment where she could channel power into one of her blades instead of using her magic to phase out of these ceaseless blows. She danced and weaved, just as quick as her foe.

Suddenly, her heel hit rock. The cave wall. She swore. It hadn't been mindlessly attacking—it had been herding her, driving her into a corner where all her nimbleness would be useless.

The monster drew back one terrible claw just as another prism of blue light sealed around it, trapping the blow mid-air. Inga, from the regrouping Omenseekers, worked that lantern light into another spell of holding. *Nice one, Rune-Eyes.* Another prism locked the other talon in place. She was holding it, if only for a moment.

Then the monster did something that surprised her: it tore its own arm off, leaving the trapped hand floating in the air, and swung at Kaya with the stump, the muscles twitching and reaching for her.

*Don't touch it,* she thought. Only one way to go, then.

Kaya fell back into the cave wall, the cold shock of phasing ripping through her entire body. It was only for a moment—but what a long mo-

ment it seemed. Her heart stopped. Everything that made her alive, that made her *Kaya*, gone gray and faded.

Then she was tumbling back onto the cave floor, a few feet to the monster's left. She saw it pivot, those heavy simian legs propelling it toward her, and Kaya fought to restart her lungs. *Get up. Get up!*

"Enough!" bellowed a voice, echoing off the walls of the cave. To Kaya's surprise and relief, the creature actually slowed, its attention pulled toward the sound for a moment. That was enough; she jammed all the arcane power she could muster into her blade and lunged, cutting low, right through one of the monster's legs.



*"Alrund, God of the Cosmos", by Kieran Yanner.*



*That voice,* she thought, tucking into a roll on the other side of the howling creature, coming up into a fighting stance. It sounded familiar, and yet. . .

It was only then that she noticed the pavonine, shifting radiance that now filled the cave. She looked back at the Omenseekers and saw Asi.

No—not Asi. Not exactly. His hood was thrown back, and from his eyes spilled that strange light illuminating the cavern walls, a shifting pattern of greens and blues and purples. Not just a charming old man, then. Or, not *just* that.

"Never have I seen such filth dare to desecrate these realms! Even the demons of Immersturm are not so foul."

Unclear, thought Kaya, how much of that was getting through to the monstrosity before them. Its leg gone, crumbling to ash, it had balanced itself on its three remaining limbs while the smaller hands stayed folded up near its chest. Hunched over, it looked even more bestial than before. Kaya was no master hunter, but even she knew that an animal was always at its most dangerous when wounded.

The monster threw itself toward her yet again, but Kaya was ready this time. It was slowing down, now. She could get it on the next pass. One clean swipe through the neck should do it.

Suddenly, the monster crashed into—nothing. It stumbled back, then hurled its weight forward again. There was a deep thrum, and the air rippled where it made contact. A magical barrier, realized Kaya, and a damn strong one at that. Even she would have had trouble phasing through that.

She turned. Behind her, Asi had his arm outstretched, that coruscating energy rippling around his hand. The monster looked between her and Asi with something she thought she recognized as uncertainty. Then, with one more grinding roar, it turned to flee.

"Wait!" shouted Kaya. "Stop it!"

But it was too late. Loping forward with that strange three-legged gait, the monster ran straight for a section of the cave wall where all the fungal metal seemed to be spreading from. Without slowing, it threw its body into the silvery surface. Rather than stopping—or collapsing the cave on all their heads—it seemed to sink into the metal, as it if were a thick and viscous liquid. A moment later, it was a bulbous intermingling of flesh and ore, and a moment after that, it was gone.

Silence settled over the cave. The Omenseekers seemed to be shrinking back from the still-radiant Asi, shielding their eyes. Even Inga seemed shaken; those sightless white eyes stayed fixed on her former advisor.

"Alrund," whispered Inga. "I—I had heard the sagas, of course, but I never thought. . ."



"Indeed, Inga Rune-Eyes. It suits the gods, from time to time, to travel in mortal guise, so that we may observe Kaldheim without being observed in turn," said Asi, his voice deep, folded in unnatural echo. "And what I have seen concerns me greatly. Across the realms are—"

"You let it get away!" snapped Kaya, pushing her daggers sharply back into their sheaths.

Asi—Alrund? *Whatever*—paused at that. Clearly no one had spoken to him in such a manner for many, many years.

"We had weakened it," Kaya said. "I saw it slowing down. Next time it will know we're coming. It will be ready for us. That thing's not as dumb as it looked."

"So you intend to pursue it further, even after seeing what it's capable of," said Alrund.

"Job's not done. And I've already been paid." It wasn't just professional courtesy, though she wasn't about to admit that in front of this whole crowd. That thing was dangerous—and, she was starting to suspect, not from around here. But that didn't make sense. Did Planeswalkers come in that shade of ugly?

"The beast has already fled Bretagard. You cannot track it by normal means," said Alrund. "It moves between the realms, as the Cosmos Mon-

sters do. Though I am certain that horror could not be counted among their number."

"Okay then. How do I follow it?" said Kaya. "You owe me, after all. For letting it escape in the first place."

That seemed to give the god some pause. "I must consult with my kin. There are too many riddles which need answering. But if you are set on pursuing that creature, the longship of Cosima will aid you in this quest. I will see to it."

Kaya heard more than a few gasps from the Omenseekers. Cosima—she'd featured in just about every prayer they'd made while at sea.

"You will find it docked in Sevalgr upon your return. I trust the Omenseekers will guide you back, though from there you will have to make your own way. The ship is. . .selective about its passengers, but it will keep you safe in your journey between realms."

"And how exactly am I supposed to know where I'm going? I'm not exactly an experienced sailor," said Kaya.

"Follow the light of Starnheim, atop the highest branches of the World Tree. It will guide you along whatever path you are meant to walk."

Kaya suppressed a sigh at that. Gods and their riddles. Just once she'd like a straightforward answer.



"I must be off." Alrund waved toward the wall of the cave. The stone seemed to ripple and melt into waves of undulating light; interweaving knotwork, beautiful and strobing lines in the same colors that emanated from Alrund, formed the outline of a door. Then the stone vanished, and in its place was—nothing. She could see lights in the distance, like the slow shifting of stars, but in between was nothing but vast, empty darkness. Suddenly, Kaya was very glad she had a magic boat to help her cross that gulf.

Alrund stepped toward the doorway he had created, then paused. "Inga Rune-Eyes. Kaya Far-Traveler. I fear the arrival of this creature is an omen—a sign of terrible things to come. In all my auguries, I see death and destruction throughout Kaldheim. I fear a Doomskar approaches—one unlike any in living memory."

A hush fell over the Omenseekers. For not the first time, Kaya felt a step behind. "Doomskar. That doesn't sound great," she said.

"A collision of the realms," said Inga. "And with it, inevitably, comes war and chaos. A time of great suffering."

*Perfect,* thought Kaya bitterly. *Hunt a monster. Save some townsfolk. Nice and simple—nothing like that mess in Ravnica.*

# EPISODE II
# Awaken the Trolls

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KAYA ENCOUNTERS THE GOD OF LIES
AND A PACK OF ENRAGED TROLLS,
AND IT'S TOUGH TO SAY
WHICH IS HARDER TO DEAL WITH.

---



*"Hagi Mob", by Steve Prescott.*

In the bottom of the longship of Cosima, Kaya lay back and watched the night sky above drift by. It was all she could really do; there were no oars on the ship, no rudder. As soon as she had stepped on board, it had lurched suddenly away from the docks, and she understood that when Alrund had told her the ship "would carry her where she needed to go," he hadn't meant she'd have any choice in the matter. Nothing to be done about it, then, except to lay back and think.

Normally, the realms of Kaldheim were no more closely linked than the individual planes—if anything, the gulf between them was more absolute, since Kaya's natural ability to planeswalk didn't allow her to cross between them. Even for the gods of this world, crossing the Cosmos was no small task.

There were exceptions, according to Inga. Now and then, through mortal ingenuity or random chance, a temporary link between two realms would open—Omenpaths, they were called. It was the Doomskars people feared, though—celestial collisions that seemed invariably to lead to calamity. The last time Bretagard collided with Karfell, a frozen land of wraiths and walking corpses, a legion of the undead made it all the way to the Beskir Stronghold before it was defeated. Never in recorded history had the Doomskar bridged their realm with Immersturm, the realm of demons, but the consequences of such a thing were hard to imagine—the last time a single demon had made it to Bretagard, he went on a rampage so horrible that they named the bleakest, darkest part of the year after it.



All in all, it sounded like precisely the sort of event she told herself she'd avoid from now on. *Stay focused, Kaya. You've got a possibly extraplanar, certainly dangerous monster to find. Plenty to keep you busy.*

A soft *thump* woke Kaya from a dreamless sleep, and her hand went to the hilt of her dagger before she realized where she was.

Wait. Where *was* she, though?

She sat up and winced at a stitch in her back. The longship may have been a powerful artifact, capable of sailing through the raw magical energies of the Cosmos, but that didn't make it any better as a bed. A thick mist had settled over the water behind her, swallowing up everything but the sound of the tide lapping at the stern. Ahead, the nose of the ship had run up on a muddy bank gnarled with roots.

"My stop, huh?" said Kaya, to no one. She climbed out and immediately her boots sunk into the wet black earth. As she wondered if she should tie the ship to one of the thick roots curling off the edge of the shore, the boat lurched back into the waves as if it had been pushed. In moments, the longship had disappeared into the mist.

"Thanks for the ride," she muttered. What exactly would she do if the monster hopped realms again? Well, she'd worry about that later. Grabbing a branch for the leverage, Kaya climbed up off the bank and into the forest.

Kaya had spent plenty of time in old places. When you specialized in things that should be dead but weren't, life took you to quite the assortment of ancient tombs and forgotten cities. But never had she been in a *wild* place that felt so very, very old. Every tree stooped low and grandfatherly; the youngest of them seemed to have already lived a handful of lifetimes. Here and there she came across collapsed stonework, scarcely recognizable under the moss that grew everywhere. Everything seemed a relic of a lost age, a concession to time's final victory. In an hour of walking, Kaya saw only one intact structure, a towering archway built of stone. It had to have housed the gates of some grand, sunken fortress once; that, or whoever had built this place needed their doorways twenty feet high.

The forest seemed to go on forever. All the while, Kaya searched for the silvery, organic-looking veins of metal she'd seen in that cave deep in the Aldergard. *I'd take a big, spooky footprint instead. Or maybe some claw marks.* But there was nothing. No sign that the monster had been this way at all.

Kaya had stopped to rest on the trunk of a fallen tree when she heard the chatter of distant voices. She was back on her feet in an instant. *Thank this plane's shiny, glowing gods.* Odds were they wouldn't be as welcoming as the Omenseekers had been, but she could at least ask whoever it was for directions.



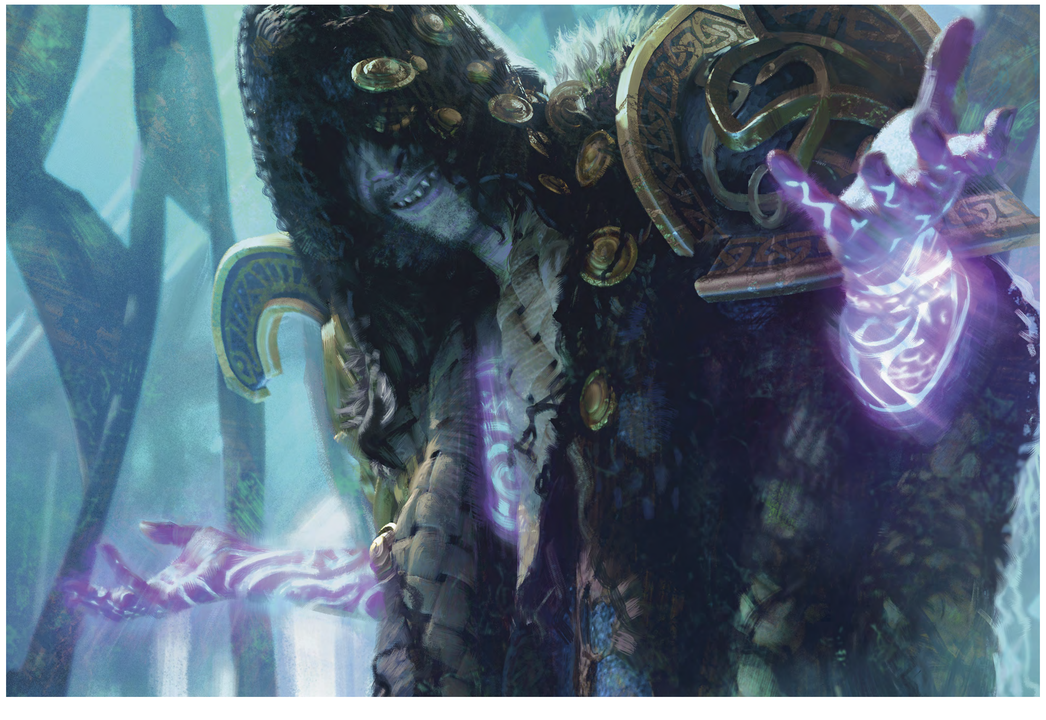
Kaya pushed aside heavy, drooping branches and ducked under mossy overhangs, following the sound. Finally, she emerged into a clearing. At one end was a massive block of worked stone, covered in faded knotwork patterns and a scaled ridge of mushrooms. The rest of the clearing held a collection of strange, and loud, creatures.

Hunched over, they stood about as tall as she was, meaning they'd probably be a good bit taller if they ever stood up straight. All of them were green—some a pale green, some a deeper shade, some an ugly mottled pattern—with long, dark hair wrapping their bony forms like a shawl and formidable tusks that clacked together as they opened and closed their mouths, speaking in a language she didn't understand. *Trolls.* Hadn't seen any on Kaldheim, yet, but there was no mistaking them. And, if the Omenseekers were to be believed, the local variety were a foul-tempered bunch.

Thankfully, they seemed too distracted talking to, and occasionally smacking, each other to notice her. Kaya was retreating back the way she came, step by careful step, when a figure stepped out onto the massive block of stone. Instead of a troll, it was a man wearing a hood that jingled with discs of gold. At his belt hung a sheathed sword.

Around the stone, four trolls stepped out from the shadows, bigger than any in the crowd. They were draped in rusty, ill-fitting suits of mail and all carried weapons of some kind—clubs, crude axes, broken swords. One of them knocked his axe against the stone block and barked something in a harsh and guttural voice. The chattering in the crowd went silent, and the hooded man gestured toward them with spread arms.

"Friends," he said, in a low, sonorous voice. "You know my many names. I am called Trickster by some, Ruse-Forger by others. Some have called



*"Valki, God of Lies", by Yongjae Choi.*



me the Prince of Mischief, some the God of Lies. All know me as Valki, and my first gift to you, the gift of languages, is free. Hear my words; understand them. What I have to tell you is of grave importance."

A god? Here? At least this one wasn't pretending to be an old man. Although, thought Kaya, there was something strange about him. Something she couldn't quite place.

"A time of great strife approaches! Soon, a path will open to cruel and strange worlds, filled with creatures of great avarice and wickedness! If allowed, these savage peoples will burn the forests of Gnottvold to the ground! They will put the proud clans of trollkind to the sword!" Silence, and the occasional nervous clacking of teeth were all the response he received. "These foul invaders wish to"—he paused, as if seeking the right words—"they wish to seize the treasures from your warrens!"

At that, the crowd exploded with angry shrieking. Valki allowed a few moments of this, before waving his hands for quiet. When no quiet was forthcoming, one of the big, armored brutes cracked a troll in the front row with his club, and the crowd went silent again.

"There is but one solution to this—the clans of the Gnottvold must attack first! Too long have you been divided by petty rivalries! Strike as one, and none shall be able to stop you!"

Then Kaya realized what she was seeing; Valki glimmered. It was subtle, at first, very different from the overflowing radiance that had spilled from Alrund. Easy to miss—but Kaya had hunted insubstantial enemies for a long time. She was used to spotting subtle currents of energy. What she was seeing was an illusion. And Kaya knew there was just no way she was seeing an illusion created by *the God of Lies.*

Quietly, Kaya ginned up a spell. Nothing fancy—a little purification, a little seeing-beyond-the-veil. Throw in a bit of wind, and. . .

She blew gently toward Valki, little motes of white light exiting her pursed lips. The spell tumbled forward, air swirling around it, whipping into a gale that blew the manes of the troll crowd to and fro. When it swept over Valki, it seemed to strip the Valki right off of him; in place of the God of Lies stood a red-skinned man with two prominent horns and a very surprised expression on his face. "Who dares to—? Show yourself!" he spat angrily.

*Bad idea,* thought Kaya. But, then again, how good had any of her ideas turned out to be so far? She stepped out from behind her tree. "Probably thought you could get away with a sloppy illusion, right?" said Kaya. "Dumb trolls won't know the difference. Bad luck for you, Tibalt."

The corner of his lip rose in a grin. The expression didn't seem to dampen any of that anger. "Sharp eyes on this one. Have we been acquainted, then?"





*"Tibalt, Cosmic Impostor", by Yongjae Choi.*

"Nope. But—what is it they say? Your reputation precedes you." Oh, she'd heard plenty of stories about the devil Planeswalker, and none of them were good.

"You're too kind. And to whom do I owe the pleasure?"

"Name's Kaya."

"Hmm. Rings a bell. A sneak and a thief, if I remember correctly. A killer."

"Quite the accusation, coming from you. What are you doing here?"

Tibalt shrugged. "I could ask you the same question. We Planeswalkers are meddlers by nature, aren't we? But as you can probably tell, I happened to be in the middle of something before you *so rudely* interrupted, so if you'll excuse me—kill her!"

The gathered trolls looked between her and Tibalt, uncertain. The big ones by the stone block showed no hesitation, though; loping like animals, they bull-rushed their way through the crowd, sending smaller specimens flying. The first one to reach Kaya swung his axe at her with both hands, bellowing madly. It went straight through the phased section of her body, its momentum carrying him forward as he tumbled and tripped over a root.

The second jabbed at her with a rusty, ancient-looking sword. She sidestepped it and shoved him hard. Just as he hit the massive tree next to her, she rendered him momentarily incorporeal; the result, when he phased back in, was an ugly tangle of green limbs sticking out of the trunk like hideous branches. The last two hovered on the edge of the crowd after that, clearly rethinking things after what had happened to their comrades.

"Yeah," said Kaya. "I wouldn't."



The trolls glanced at each other. A moment later, both dropped their weapons and ran. She looked up just in time to see Tibalt turn and run into the woods. *Jerk's really going to make me chase him.*

She followed him through a tangled knot of trees. Tibalt had a head start, but he couldn't turn his body insubstantial at will; slowly but surely, phasing through fallen trees and crumbling stone archways, she gained on him. Finally, in an open stretch of land between a series of mossy hills on one side and a few rickety wooden structures on another, she cut him off. He bent over to catch his breath.

"You run like the *devil!*" he said, laughing and wheezing.

"We done?" said Kaya. "Tell me what you're doing here. What do you get out of riling up a bunch of trolls? What's in it for you?"

"My dear," said Tibalt, giving her a look at his many sharp teeth. "Chaos is its own reward, and nothing puts a smile on my face like a bit of mayhem. But I can't see how it's any of your business. This isn't your home. These aren't your people."

The thought had occurred to her, yeah. But she *did* have business here. "There's a monster in Kaldheim. Something from outside of the plane. You wouldn't have had anything to do with that, would you?"

Tibalt cocked his head. “A *monster?* Why, I’m shivering in my boots! I positively must find somewhere to hide! Let me just—”

“You’re not going anywhere, and your troll minions aren’t around to help this time. Not like they were able to slow me down.”

“Oh, clearly not!” said Tibalt, grinning in a way that made Kaya uneasy. “At least, not the *Hagi* variety. You proved yourself quite capable of dispatching them. But as far as their cousins, the Torga—well, I like their odds a bit better.”

He held two fingers to his mouth, then, and gave the loudest, most shrill whistle Kaya had ever heard. She clapped her hands over her ears and bent over, wincing. After it had passed, Kaya glanced around frantically, ready for a legion of trolls to charge out of the woods, but there seemed to be nothing but rolling, grassy hills and those collapsed structures shot through with wood-rot.

“Looks like your big, bad troll friends aren’t showing up,” said Kaya. “Now let’s—”

A rumbling underfoot cut her off, and the hill closest to Tibalt got about a foot taller. His grin climbed a few inches, too.

“Actually,” said Tibalt, “it looks like your eyes aren’t as keen as you believed them to be.”





*“Gnottvold Slumbermound”, by Simon Dominic.*

One after another, they pulled free of the earth, showering the clearing with clumps of black dirt. On one side of her, the wooden structures seemed to collapse in reverse as a behemoth form pushed itself out of the ground, shaking loose errant pieces of wood.

They were massive—twenty feet tall at least, the bony ridges along their body resembling nothing so much as features of the landscape. Of most keen interest to Kaya were their fists, each one roughly the size and shape of a boulder. In their long, lank hair grew mosses and grasses; on

the one that had emerged from beneath the wooden structure, planks and beams hung off it like primitive armor. Set deep into their geological faces were pinprick-red eyes. One yawned as it rose, revealing a mouth of yellow, twisted fangs.

"Torga trolls, you see, simply hate to be woken from a deep sleep," said Tibalt. "And once they have been, they've got an unfortunate tendency to rip apart anyone and anything in the vicinity."

"Are you crazy?!" hissed Kaya, turning to face the trolls behind her. She counted six altogether. "They'll kill us both!"

There was an unusual sound behind her, then—a keening, whistling noise, as if the air itself was being sharpened. She turned back to see that Tibalt had drawn his sword. It was a marvel, that was plain. Forged from some kind of glass, it seemed to contain a shifting spectrum of color she had only seen once before: spilling off of Alrund himself.

Next to Tibalt was a hole in the world. There was no other way to put it; it hung in the air, the edges ragged and uneven and faintly glowing. Heat and sulfurous air seemed to pour out, and through the tear, Kaya glimpsed black earth, split with volcanic ruptures.

Tibalt hefted the sword and grinned at her. "Works like a charm. I'd say I wish you luck, but that would make me a liar, wouldn't it?"



With that, he stepped through the portal. Behind him, the edges came together and vanished—leaving Kaya with the trolls.

She pulled her daggers free from their sheaths as slowly as she could. Maybe she could still get out of this without a fight. "Listen—the guy who woke you up, he just stepped out, but if you'll just give me a minute to explain myself—"

One of the trolls swung at her open-palmed, like it was trying to squash a bug. Would have succeeded, too, if Kaya hadn't phased out of the way. Even clear of the blow, the impact rattled her teeth. "Okay," she said. "I tried."

She jabbed one of her blades into the troll's arm—or, rather, she tried to. It felt almost exactly like trying to stab a hunk of rock. There was a ringing snap, and she watched the dagger she'd had since Tolvada break in two. The shock lasted only a moment, but that was long enough for the troll to sweep out its hand and knock her across the clearing.

Her head was ringing when she pushed herself back to her feet. It had been a long time since she had been hit that hard. She flipped her remaining dagger tip-down, in a reversed grip. "I *liked* that blade."

She'd tumbled right into squashing range of another troll; it swung at her with an uprooted tree, which she phased through. On the other side she slashed at its exposed leg; the blow scraped and skittered off the

thick hide, leaving nothing but a thin scratch. "Come *on,*" she said, dodging a backhand from a second troll.

She rolled between the legs of a third, narrowly avoiding its clumsy attempt to grab her. *Time to fight dirty.* Wrapping her blade in ethereal energy, Kaya jabbed it between two huge vertebrae and yanked her hand out just in time to have it rematerialize. Tricky timing—but she was rewarded with a deep bellow as the dagger solidified in its spine. With a tremendous crash, the troll hit the ground.

"Who's next?" she said, turning to the others. Okay, she may have briefly disarmed herself with that little trick, but it was nothing she couldn't—

Pain exploded along her left side, and then she was tumbling, rolling across the ground. The troll she had *just* put down—the one who had apparently swatted her—was lurching to his feet; she could see the scratch she'd put on his leg closing up. *They heal too,* she thought, in between the waves of nausea. Why did everything on this plane heal?

The other trolls roared and banged their fists on the ground, spread out in a semi-circle that blotted out the sun. One against six. She'd won fights with worse odds. But then again, she'd had weapons in those fights. One dagger broken; one embedded in an angry troll. Kaya took a deep breath, wincing at the jolt in her ribs.

"Need a hand?" came a voice from her left.





*"Tyvar Kell", by Chris Rallis.*

Leaning against one of the ancient, twisting trees of this place was a man with long braids of red hair. By his pointed ears, Kaya could see that he was an elf, but his body was packed with more muscle than she was used to seeing on their kind. He was clearly proud of it, too; despite the cold, he wore no shirt. Only a collection of charms hanging from necklaces and a pair of bracers, one of which was fixed with a brass knife-blade. There was something about his relaxed, easy pose that made him seem young, even for a people who always seemed young.

"How long have you been standing there?" she said.

"Long enough to see that you're not faring too well. Not that I blame you! A Torga troll is no easy opponent, let alone six. Lucky for you I happened to be passing by."

That irked her. For a moment, Kaya turned away from the approaching trolls, who still had every intention of smashing her to paste. "Listen, kid, get out of here before you get hurt. I can handle myself."

"I'm not so sure about that. After all, you've lost both of your blades, while I still have my secret weapon."

"That the thing on your wrist?"

"Oh, no. I meant this." He tossed up a small, flat stone. Caught it, made it tumble over his long fingers.



Kaya blinked. "That's your secret weapon? A rock?"

He only smiled and strolled toward the trolls as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"Hey! Watch out!" she shouted. Stupid kid—making her save them both. Now she couldn't just run. She moved toward him, preparing to phase him out, but there was a lot of distance to cover.

The trolls, it appeared, were equanimous; they were just as willing to tear this new opponent apart. As he came closer, one of them swung a mud-covered fist. He stepped out of the way without breaking pace.

He was quick; she'd give him that. Even without the ability to turn insubstantial, catching the elf seemed an impossibility for the sluggish trolls. They'd slam the ground where he'd just stood while he danced to the side; they'd clap their hands together where he'd been a moment before, and he'd backflip away. It was like trying to catch smoke, or bottle lightning. More than once, Kaya thought she saw him linger a moment longer than he needed to, letting a blow from his foes miss by inches instead of miles. *A show-off, then.*

Meanwhile, a transformation was happening in the fist that gripped the rock; the skin of his arm and hand appeared to be growing polished and hard, turning almost exactly the same gray as the stone. As one of the trolls tried to stomp the nimble elf into the bedrock below the hill,

he leaped suddenly forward. He didn't strike the creature with that brass blade affixed to his arm, though; he only touched the creature on the leg with his new stone hand.

Suddenly, the same transformation that had covered the young elf's arm began to spread rapidly across the troll's leg. It's green-gray hide, already pitted and craggy, changed to rough stone. The rock moved in a ripple up its torso, creeping ahead with alarming speed. The lumbering creature had enough time to drop its tusked jaw open in surprise before the wave of stone swept up its face, the expression of surprise freezing in place.

The troll with the tree swung it toward the elf in a wide arc; he vaulted straight over it, angling his body between two whip-like branches and tucking into a roll on the other side. He placed that stone-gray hand on the elbow of the troll; in moments, the whole creature was rock.

He dodged another blow, turned another troll to stone, and another. It took less than a minute from beginning to end. When they were all defeated, the elf stood with his hands on his hips, staring proudly at the towering statues as if he'd carved them himself. He looked so self-satisfied, Kaya hated to admit that she was impressed. "Not bad, kid."

He looked at her, his expression going sour. "Would you stop calling me that?"

"What should I call you then?"



"Tyvar Kell. Prince of the elves of Skemfar. Greatest hero in all the realms. Your personal savior."

"Tyvar, then," she said, trying not to roll her eyes. "I'm Kaya. I appreciate the help, but what's a great hero like yourself doing out in the middle of the woods? Any chance you were following me?"

"Not you. Valki."

"He's not Valki," said Kaya, walking over to where her blade had snapped. She slipped the metal end into the sheath; the hilt, she hung from her belt. "His name is Tibalt." Which of these trolls had her other dagger been embedded in? It was hard to say now—especially because they were all statues. She swept one hand through, probing carefully. It was stone all the way through. She swore under her breath.

"Yes, I'd gathered that, thanks to your handy dispelling. I'd been suspicious of him for some time, though. Not long ago he came to see my brother in court. I don't know what lies he told Harald, but ever since that visit the elves have been preparing for war. There are rumors they mean to march against the gods themselves." She turned just in time to see all the bravado and swagger he'd had before absent. He looked young, and worried—a moment later he'd straightened up, but not quick enough for her to miss it. If Tibalt was messing with his people, she guessed she couldn't blame him for being a little concerned.

"But how the legions intend to cross into the realm of the gods, I don't know," he finished.

*Oh, ancients.* "The Doomskar. Alrund said there was a Doomskar coming," said Kaya.

At that, Tyvar looked as surprised as the troll statues behind him. "A Doomskar? And you heard this from Alrund himself?"

"Yeah. Nice guy. Lent me a boat."

"And—this Tibalt. He is an enemy of yours?"

"Certainly not a friend. I don't know what he's up to, but it's trouble one way or another."

"We'll pursue him together, then. Clearly you need my help," said Tyvar, smiling at her in a way that hadn't yet failed to piss her off. *With an attitude like that,* she thought, *this kid's gonna get himself killed.* Not like that was her problem. "Listen, I've got other business. I can't go running after every villain that rears his ugly, horned head. Besides, I don't even know how we'd follow him."

"What do you mean?"

"He used a sword to open some kind of portal."

"Did you see anything? Through it, on the other side," said Tyvar.



"Not much. It was only open for a second," said Kaya, trying to think. "I remember seeing fire, though. And the ground looked like it had been charred black."

"Immersturm," said Tyvar. The name dropped into her stomach like an iron weight; she'd heard Inga whisper stories about that place. *The realm of demons.* Tyvar, bafflingly, seemed excited at the news.

"Well, unless you happen to have a magic boat hanging around—"

But Tyvar already had his eyes closed. He extended both hands in front of him, and Kaya reflexively took a step back. Slowly, in the surrounding air, currents of mana began to curl and twist into complex patterns of glowing knotwork. Kaya realized she had seen magic like this before—it had looked almost effortless when Alrund had opened a doorway into another realm, but the fundamentals were the same. When it opened into that shimmering nightscape of the Cosmos, she felt an odd decompression in her ears, as if all the air had suddenly gone out of the clearing. Tyvar finally opened his eyes: a doorway stood before them.

"Where in the hells did you learn to do that?" breathed Kaya.

"The sorcerers of Skemfar are experts of their craft. And you can count me an expert among experts," he said, grinning. "I've been all throughout the realms of Kaldheim. My natural gifts express themselves a bit differently in each one."

She took a step closer, and something caught her eye. In the bundle of charms around his neck, among the bones and gems and little twisted bits of metal, was a small octahedron of dark stone. Covering the sides was a minute, precise etching—a design she had seen before. *But not here.*

"Ah," he said, catching her gaze. He held up the little shaped stone to the light. "Feel free to admire it. I found this one in a remote realm, one even the sagas don't speak of. It was called—"

"Zendikar," she said, cutting him off. "Holy ancients. You're a Planeswalker."

His grin flagged, uncertain. "And what, exactly, is a Planeswalker?"

# EPISODE III
# The Saga of Tibalt

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MASTER STORYTELLER TIBALT
TAKES YOU THROUGH KALDHEIM'S GREATEST SAGA.

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*Ah, the smell of bubbling tar! The warm kiss of volcanic ruptures! After all this time spent toiling in the frozen corners of this accursed plane, it reminds me of home. If only every branch along that damnable World Tree could be more like Immersturm! If you ask me, all of Kaldheim would be improved with a touch more fire, a dash of anarchy. Which, if I've done my job right, is exactly where it's all heading.*

*Yes, there's no doubt in my mind that all this plotting, these months of hard work, will come together nicely. But I must admit, there is one thought which keeps me up at night: what if, as the world burns around them, nobody knows who lit the match?*

*This plane is lousy with storytellers. Listen long enough and all their tales blend together: they love to repeat the same drivel about good and evil, heroes and villains, right and wrong. Let's give them something fresh.*

*A story to remember—the last saga of Kaldheim. And I promise, it's got an ending to die for. . .*

The saga begins with a Planeswalker named Tibalt. Not only was he powerful and brilliant, but he was also despised by most everyone he met on account of his many gifts—not that it bothered him. However, on account of his many jealous enemies, Tibalt traveled often from place to place and never stayed on one plane for too long. This is the story of how he came to Kaldheim, and how he met the Horrible Beast.

See, this Horrible Beast had heard about Tibalt's many talents and desperately needed his help. The beast knew that a handsome and powerful Planeswalker such as Tibalt would never stoop to helping a hideous, stupid monster unless his hand was forced, so the Horrible Beast snuck up on him one day and stuck Tibalt with a nasty, tricky sort of poison. He called this poison a "seed"—and the only way the Horrible Beast would remove it was if Tibalt caused a distraction on his behalf.

What the monster didn't realize was that Tibalt had already been planning to stir up trouble in Kaldheim. So, while the wise and mighty Planeswalker agreed to the Horrible Beast's terms, he was really only doing what he had meant to do anyway.

First, Tibalt needed a disguise. Nobody would listen to some newcomer, after all. With Tibalt's vast reservoir of cunning, it was easy enough



to find Valki. It happened that this God of Lies, this Prince of Tricksters, was foolish enough to get lied to and tricked himself. How about that?

Tibalt wrapped Valki in magical chains and brought him to the coldest, most remote realm he could find: Karfell. There was this frozen mummy of a king there who Tibalt had worked out a deal with. So long as Valki stayed deep in the dungeon of this King Narfi's glacial palace, Narfi and his Dread Marn—that's what this king called the walking stiffs making up his army—could have the first pick of treasure when the Doomskar started. And oh, what a Doomskar it would be!

Never had Tibalt seen a greedier, more gold-crazed bunch of zombies! The denizens of the other realms, he knew, would need a bit more convincing before they were willing to march to war.

The next step in Tibalt's masterful plan was to suit up in his new disguise as Valki and visit Koll the Forgemaster. Koll was one of the dwarves—that metal-brained, oblivious species of blacksmiths—and it just so happened that Koll was the greatest of them all, for whatever that was worth. He was the only one who could work with Tyrite, the hardened sap of the World Tree, which had all sorts of interesting properties. Koll was making a sword out of the stuff, a blade which could open paths between all the realms of Kaldheim. It was supposed to be for Halvar, the god of battle—every plane has one of those dumb brutes, you know—but the thing was, Tibalt needed it. Crossing between the realms was a real pain

otherwise, and he had a lot of work to do up and down the World Tree. Koll was awfully stubborn about handing it over to Valki—something about Halvar saving him from a giant wolf and Valki being the God of Lies—so Tibalt did the realms a favor and pushed the obnoxious dwarf right into his own forge.

Tibalt took his act to Skemfar, home of the elves, and sought an audience with their king. King Harald, son of Hraldir, the very same elf who had united the warring clans of Wood and Shadow, was known across the realms as a wise and steadfast leader. He was known to *Tibalt,* though, as a proud, paranoid fool who believed the elves should be in charge of every last twig in Kaldheim, and hatred and mistrust of the Skoti—the gods of Kaldheim—had long ago settled into the bones of every elf in Skemfar.

Oh, if you could have seen the royal court that day! The lies that clever Tibalt wove—the dark cloud that settled over Harald as he heard of all the terrible things the gods had planned for his people, too terrible even for the mischievous Valki to stand idly by! The only choice, if the elves were to survive, was clear: strike first.

In Surtland, Tibalt warned the frost giants of an incursion of Torga trolls, awakened from their long slumber. In Bretagard, he promised the vicious Skelle clan the return of their demon master, Varragoth. All across the realms of Kaldheim, Tibalt sowed the seeds of war and chaos.





*"The Trickster-God's Heist", by Randy Vargas.*



*"Harald, King of Skemfar", by Grzegorz Rutkowski.*



But what of Starnheim? The Valkyries—well, they presented a problem, even to cunning Tibalt. They were duty-bound creatures, separate from the politics that controlled the other realms. They cared not for gold or power, and they feared no other mortal force in Kaldheim. What could a dedicated trickster do with such rigid, inflexible souls?

We pause the saga, for a moment, to recount a saying common throughout the Multiverse: the branch that doesn't bend, breaks.

Tibalt may have been both brilliant and powerful, but he wasn't strong enough to take on every shepherd and reaper in the halls of Starnheim. There was a being, though, that could! Koma, he was called—the Cosmos Serpent, first and oldest of the monsters birthed from the World Tree. Long ago, the Skoti had banished Koma from entering the realms, trapping him in the empty Cosmos. For eons, his restlessness grew, his hunger went unsated and his thirst for destruction unquenched. Tibalt pitied the poor snake; he really did. So, with the Sword of the Realms, he cut open a doorway to the home of the Valkyries, where the Cosmos Serpent could make up for lost time.

Now, Tibalt was no great believer in swords. His faith laid with knives, with hooks, with hellfire and brimstone—but even Tibalt had to admit that the Sword of the Realms had proven very useful. He had crossed the Cosmos with it, time and again. He had used it to unleash Koma on the Valkyries of Starnheim. Now, he was using it for a far more humble task,

though one just as important—he was leaving a trail, dragging the tip through the black basalt surface of Immersturm. It was important, after all, that the Planeswalker follow him here.

The end of the saga isn't written yet, but let me jump ahead and tell you how it ends: Tibalt kills the Planeswalker. The last thing she sees, as the life drains from her eyes, is Kaldheim burning. *All* the realms, together at last in one great and glorious conflagration.




*"Open the Omenpaths", by Eric Deschamps.*

# EPISODE IV
# Into the Demons' Realm

KAYA AND TYVAR PURSUE TIBALT
INTO THE REALM OF THE DEMONS.
CAN THEY STOP HIM FROM USHERING IN
THE END OF DAYS?

For once in her time on Kaldheim, Kaya didn't need to worry about the cold. On the other side of Tyvar's Omenpath, a blast of hot, noxious air had greeted her. The sky was the first thing she saw: rolling dark clouds without the memory of a sun. The only light to be found came from the red thunderbolts that occasionally split the sky and the orange glow rising from somewhere below them.

Kaya stood with Tyvar at the top of a ridge of black, jagged rock. Over the lip, she could see a tarry morass spiderwebbed with smoldering orange ruptures, a vast expanse of lava whose surface had partially hardened into great chunks of black pumice floating on molten rock. Now and then, a pocket of lava would burst into a molten geyser, sending glowing chunks of lava spattering into the air. It was hard to imagine somewhere

less hospitable to life—and yet, Tyvar seemed to look at the apocalyptic vista with nothing short of wonder.

"We made it," he said. "I wasn't sure we could."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Kaya.

"The gods sealed this place long ago, after Varragoth first escaped, with powerful runes of warding. I've never opened an Omenpath here—no elf has. But Tibalt must have somehow damaged the wards."

*That sword.* It hadn't been any kind of magic she'd seen before—nothing like the portal Alrund had opened. "We've got to get that sword away from him. If he can rip open the doors to this place, who knows what else he can do with it?"

Tyvar pointed behind her. She turned, hand automatically reaching for her dagger—and finding, she remembered a moment later, nothing. It wasn't a threat he was pointing out, anyway.

Down on the partially cooled surface of the magma lake, a few oddly straight lines were carved out of the web of volcanic ruptures. After a moment, her eyes adjusted to the low light, and she saw what had been carved into the basalt, waiting for their arrival: an orange molten arrow.

"Well, among the many things Tibalt's been accused of, subtlety's not one of them," muttered Kaya.





*"Immersturm Skullcairn", by Cliff Childs.*

In an easy, almost practiced motion, Tyvar hopped over the lip of the ridge. He kicked off a spire of rock, then slid down a slope of glassy gravel. His momentum stopped just in front of the magma flats, where he looked back up at her. "Coming?"

Fun as it would have been to hop between lily pads of cooled stone, Kaya didn't feel like taking a dunk into lava if she missed a jump. Apparently, neither did Tyvar; once she'd gotten down to the edge of the lake, he'd pressed his fingertips into the blackened shore and closed his eyes.

"Hang on," he said. "I want to try something."

Across the magma, the basalt shore began to creep out. The stone didn't just expand or double up on itself, either—it seemed to *grow,* tendrils of rock twining together, knitting themselves into a bridge. When he opened his eyes, Tyvar seemed just as surprised as she was.

She stepped gingerly onto it. It was subtly ridged, latticed in places in a way she didn't think stone was naturally capable of. It was, she found herself thinking, oddly beautiful.

*First, he turns those trolls to stone, now this. The kid's a transmuter.* But that wasn't all he was. Somehow, Tyvar had sparked without realizing it—gone all the way to Zendikar, just thinking it was another of Kaldheim's realms.

Back in Gnottvold, when he'd opened that Omenpath, Tyvar had made it clear that he was going in whether or not she was coming with him. If he was just another headstrong hero intent on some glorious death, Kaya would have let him go—after all, Kaldheim had no shortage of those, and she had work to do. But Tyvar was a Planeswalker, and one who didn't know what that really meant. Somehow, it seemed like a waste to let Tibalt kill him before he'd seen more of the Multiverse. She tried to tell him a bit about it all as they walked.



"These planes are like the realms, then? And connecting them—an even vaster World Tree?" he said.

"Well, without the literal branches. And no giant animals in the spaces between." At least as far as she knew. "More importantly, they're not connected in the same way. Portals don't just show up, and there aren't spells for crossing between them. The only way to move from one to the other is to be one of us."

"A Planeswalker," said Tyvar, kicking a hunk of blackened pumice off into the lava. "A fine offer. But I think I'll pass. There's glory aplenty for me in Kaldheim, and more realms than I could explore in one lifetime. Besides, how would people know to tell stories about me if I left the World Tree altogether? I'd have to start anew each time."

*Yeah,* thought Kaya. *That's the tricky part.* New friends, new enemies, new rules to every plane. Always the stranger, the newcomer. Dropped again and again into other people's squabbles, other people's wars. It was exciting, at first. Then, after a while, it got exhausting. But, like it or not, it wasn't a choice.

Kaya grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. "You don't get to pass, kid. That's not how this works. You're a Planeswalker, whether you like it or not, and next time you wind up somewhere full of magic, monsters, and people you don't understand, you'll need"—she scrambled

for words—"you'll need some kind of code. A set of rules." Kaya's code was simple: do no harm. . .unless they had it coming and somebody's paying you for the privilege. Sure, once or twice she'd gotten mixed up in messes she should have stayed out of; now and then, if she was feeling charitable, she'd off a particularly troublesome ghost pro bono. But the code was important—it was the only thing that followed her from plane to plane, the only thing she could count on. What would Tyvar be able to count on when he moved on from Kaldheim one day? What glory or heroic tales would matter then?

Tyvar pulled his arm free, his annoyance plain as day on those chiseled yet somehow boyish features. "I have a code—the same one passed down by the warriors of Skemfar for untold generations. I'm in no need of a stranger's schooling on such things."

"I'm just trying to help you!" she said. Nobody had ever done that for her and look how she had ended up. Mercenary, thief, killer. Tibalt was in no position to accuse her of anything—but he'd been right.

"I am not a child, and I don't need your help. As I've demonstrated, I'm more than capable of handling myself." With that, he stormed off, down the path of black rock.

*Stubborn fool.* Why was she even still here? She had other paying work on Kaldheim, after all. A monster she was supposed to be tracking down.



She was still deciding whether to turn around when the first harpoon cracked into the blackened path, inches from Tyvar's foot. It was a crude weapon, rough iron ringed in barbs, and heavy enough to sink straight into rock. For an instant, Tyvar seemed too stunned to move—and he didn't notice the second one screaming toward him.

Kaya reached him just in time, turning his torso to ghostly light just as the iron harpoon whistled through him. He stumbled back, planted one hand on the path, and turned his arms charcoal black.

"On our right!" snapped Kaya.

Cutting a path toward them, through the chunks of cooled magma, was—improbably—a ship. It reminded her of the longships the Omenseekers had piloted, but while those were sleek and narrow, meant to slip into narrow channels and explore remote coves, this vessel was meant for only one thing. Spikes ringed the outer edge, cruel and narrow; the prow was an iron wedge with a chipped, battering edge. In place of sails, a sheet of flame seemed to billow and catch whatever unearthly current was pushing them closer.

"Demons," said Tyvar. "Ready yourself."

As the ship drew nearer, Kaya could make out three figures on board. On one, an iron helmet added rows of horns to the two that naturally curled from his forehead; a black visor concealed his eyes. Another had



*"Demon Berserker Token", by Grzegorz Rutkowski.*

one hand replaced by a massive flanged mace, the ridges crusted over with blood. Near the prow, on an elevated platform, was the biggest—a thickly built brute with his right side covered in black iron plates. The membranes of his great wings were rent and torn from past skirmishes. With his left hand, he hefted another harpoon, leaning back for the throw.

This one, Tyvar was prepared for. With a dancer's timing, he swiped his blackened arm across the path of the harpoon, knocking it into the magma. "We need to close the distance," he said.



Kaya grimaced. "Actually, I don't think that's our problem."

The ship was only picking up speed, the fiery sails stoked into furnace-hot gusts. Two of the demons, the smaller ones, spread their wings and dragged themselves into the air with great, eager flaps. They didn't mean to just pull up alongside them.

"Look out!" shouted Kaya.

She dodged to one side of the path Tyvar had built them; he dodged to the other. Then that ramming edge along the prow smashed into it, scattering basalt and cinders into the air.

Kaya rolled to her feet in time to see the one with the mace hand swooping out of the sky toward her. He brought the weapon down in a colossal diving blow that smashed a dimple into the volcanic pack where Kaya had been standing a moment before.

Before he could pull his arm back, she stamped down on the flanges and phased it partially into the stone. He bellowed and grabbed for her, but she slipped free of his grasp like smoke, hop-stepping back to the harpoon still embedded in the rock.

It wasn't hard for her to wrench it free—phasing it here and there did the trick—but the weight of it nearly tipped her into the magma lake. While she struggled with both hands to heft the heavy iron pole, the de-

mon beat his wings furiously, heaving and pulling at the volcanic rock enclosing his arm. With a little concentration, Kaya turned the harpoon entirely immaterial, then threw.

When it left her hand, it went from weightless, insubstantial, to suddenly every bit as heavy and lethal as before—and traveling at a much higher speed. It punched clean through the demon's hammered breastplate and out the other side. The demon thrashed in place for a moment, the mace on his arm still melded with the ground, before collapsing.

Kaya allowed herself a moment to exhale, then started forward. Planting one foot on the armor encasing the demon's back, she vaulted up onto the deck of the longship. On the other side, she could see Tyvar flanked. The demon with the horned helmet was chopping at him furiously with a pair of short cleavers lined with wicked, serrated teeth, and the big one she'd seen with his body half-encased in metal kept him penned in with great sweeps from a spiked hammer. Just one blow from that looked sufficient to take the elf's head off—but so far, Tyvar had managed to stay just ahead of every swing. His arms, she noticed, were no longer the rough black of basalt. Now they were a molten, glowing orange, as if he'd heated them in a forge. Each time he batted away a cleaver blow, embers scattered and winked out into the air.

He was quick, strong, and skilled, there was no doubt about that. But he couldn't keep this up forever.



She ducked under the flame sail, shielding her face from the heat with one hand, and took a running leap off the side, landing with a less-than-graceful flop across the big demon's back. He was twice her height, probably more than twice her weight, and barely leaned forward at the impact, but she managed to secure a hold around his neck.

With a thought, she wreathed her hand in that eerie light and straightened her fingers into a spear. *Quick jab through the heart. Flicker out of phase, and extract. Won't be comfortable, but it'll get the job done.*

As the demon groped awkwardly around his back trying to reach her, Kaya jabbed her hand just to the left of the spine, rematerializing for an instant—

And nearly blacked out from the pain. It was *burning* inside the demon, like sticking her hand in a furnace. She lost her grip on the demon's neck and tumbled off down onto the rough black stone beneath.

The demon shuddered, fell to one knee—then pushed himself to standing using the handle of that massive war hammer as a brace. He turned toward her, tiny red eyes smoldering with rage. From his mouth poured a thick black bile that bubbled and steamed. She'd hurt him, but not enough.

Her hand had only been material for a fraction of a second, yet she could still feel the pain, white-hot and absolute. But pain, like so many

things, was a tool. A tool Kaya knew how to use. *Focus on it. Use it.* From somewhere deep inside her, Kaya felt an icy chill welling up.

The demon raised his hammer, the great muscles working to lift the massive thing, boiling blood still spilling from his mouth. That's when Kaya phased the rocky path beneath him into empty air.

The demon's wings shot out on reflex, trying to rebalance, to keep himself aloft. It might have worked, if not for the holes and tears that pocked their leathery surface, or the great hammer hanging above him. He started roaring the moment his legs sunk into the lava—he fell forward, dropping the hammer, clawing for purchase on the rough black stone still making up the part of the path Kaya stood on. With a sharp kick, she sent him flailing backward into the molten rock and allowed the path to rematerialize over him.

Across the path, Tyvar's battle with the remaining demon raged on; with only one opponent, the elf was on the offensive. The brass knife affixed to his bracer had grown longer now, glowing orange with the same volcanic heat that covered his arms. With a snapping stroke that left heat shimmers through the air, he chopped straight through one of the demon's cleavers; his next slash passed through its neck. She heard a sizzling sound, smelled something worse than burning hair, and then the demon's helmed head bounced once off the basalt and into the lava while the body sagged onto the path of black rock. The fight was done.



Kaya's hand still throbbed awfully despite the spell she'd used to fix the worst of it. She'd never had much of a knack for healing magic. It would likely be days before she had a full range of motion in it again.

"That was amazing!" said Tyvar.

"Yeah, yeah," said Kaya. "I saw what you—"

"That jarl was twice your size! Do you know how many humans, in all the sagas I've known, have slain a demon? Assuming you didn't talk things through with the other one, you bested *two!* And without a weapon! The skalds *must* hear about this. I'll tell them myself, when we're finished!"

"Uh, thanks," said Kaya, caught off guard. *So the kid can share glory.* "If we plan on doing this again, though, I'd prefer to be armed."

Something seemed to dawn on Tyvar, then. "Of course. Allow me."

He stooped over the massive hammer the demon jarl had dropped before going into the magma. Kaya was about to protest—*a bit heavy for me, not really my style*—when Tyvar pushed his fingers into the black iron of the hammerhead as if it were mud. From it, he pulled two fistfuls of metal: one he dropped to the path where it clinked dully against the rock.

The other nugget he held up and squinted at. "Terrible quality. But we can do something about that."

He pressed both hands around it and squeezed, the muscles along his arms and shoulders going taut. When his palms came apart, he was holding a small oval, rough in parts like the pit of a fruit. He knelt over and pushed it into the basalt, which took some doing. Afterward, he did the same with the other nugget. Kaya watched, mystified, as he scooped broken, charcoal-colored earth into a little mound over each. "What are you doing?"

"Everything has the potential to grow," said Tyvar, straightening back up. "Trees, people—we expect it from them. But earth and stone, too, given time, and patience. Or, failing that, a bit of magic. I told you my abilities work differently in each realm I pass through. I figured in a place as lifeless as this, anything would be desperate to grow. Even metal. And I was right," he said, grinning.

She'd never heard of transmutation like this. "What about back in Gnottvold? What you did to those trolls?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Easy. Torga trolls are creatures of the earth—they spend years at a time as little more than boulders, gathering moss. They're not far from stone as is. I only coaxed them a bit closer to that shape."

Then, before her eyes, something poked up out of the ground. A sprout—the same dark iron color that the oval had been, but curling, unfurling. Then another, from the other mound. Kaya watched as they grew taller and thicker, as they sprouted tendrils that wove together into braiding latticework. When the top folded over the rest, falling in a D-shaped curve, she realized what she was looking at: a hand-axe. Two, actually. Grown from the ground, like stalks of wheat.

Tyvar reached over and pulled them from the rock—twisting as he did so, as if snapping off a root. Then he handed them to her, handle first. "You like them fast and light. Is that right?"

Warily, she took one. The whole thing was made of the same material—no rust, no blood, no imperfections, just cold gray metal. The head of the axe, with those ornate knotwork patterns grown into it, was a lighter color than the handle. Somehow the grip was rougher, in a way that felt like it wouldn't slip from her hands. She flipped it into the air, everything rotating around a point just below the axe head, and caught it again. Well-balanced, for something that popped out of the ground.

"Thanks," she said, tucking the axe and its sister into her belt.

Tyvar slapped her shoulder and grinned. "I'm certain you'll put them to good use. Now, we have a villain to catch. Shall we continue?"

"Actually," said Kaya, glancing back at where the demon longship was wedged into the black stone path. "I've got a better idea."



*"Kaya the Inexorable", by Anna Podedworna.*

As vessels went, Kaya had much preferred Cosima's longship. On top of its uncanny ability to take one wherever they needed to go, there was no chance of impaling herself along the gunwale or setting her hair on fire adjusting the boom. Luckily, Tyvar seemed to have a bit more experience sailing than she did, and once the demon ship built up speed, it smashed through the plates of cooled magma floating on the lava's surface without so much as a judder.



The elf worked the sails while she kept watch from the prow. "There," she said, pointing ahead of them. Rising above an ash-gray plain was a vast, dark mountain. Where the peak should have been was a jagged, open cone that nearly brushed the roiling clouds above. At the top, Kaya could make out a strange light. It seemed to distort the air around it like shimmers of heat, occasionally sending a rippling ribbon of uncanny blue or green streaking into the sky. Where had she seen that light before? *Alrund.* In Kaldheim, that was the light of the gods. But it was the same light she'd seen at the fringes of the portal Tibalt had carved open.

Tyvar shifted the rudder, angling the ship toward the mountain. "That's the Bloodcrag! I never thought I'd actually get to see it."

"Great. Perfect. Bloodcrag." Briefly, she considered if it wasn't too late to turn this boat around. Nobody was paying her for Tibalt's head, after all.

*But that horned bastard has so many enemies, I could probably find a buyer. Chandra, maybe.*

They left the longship beached along the slagged shore of the lava lake. Scaling the mountain, at least, wouldn't be the hard part. Shaped into the rock were a set of ancient stairs. They were worn with age and slightly too large for Kaya or Tyvar to climb comfortably—carved into this place many millennia ago for the bloodthirsty inhabitants of Immersturm, not for elves or humans—but they were manageable.

Partway up, something caught her eye. Movement below them, on the magma lake. Kaya paused, her back to one of the huge and faintly warm steps. Across the surface of the lake, between the occasional flare of erupting lava, iron ships cut through the black, each one topped with a flickering curtain of flame in the shape of a sail. It was too far for her to make out any figures—from here, even the grim vessels looked like something she might find in a toy shop—but over the lash of wind this high up, she could just make out the steady beat of drums.

"By the Einir," muttered Tyvar. "There must be dozens."

"Hundreds," said Kaya. "The ship we ran across must have been part of their vanguard. Scouts."

"And that's the army."

But why? All this—a legion of demons, a fleet of longships—just to stop them? She knew she was tough, and Tyvar wasn't half-bad for a budding Planeswalker, but this seemed like overkill.

Unless—

Unless they weren't here for them at all.

"That sword," said Kaya. "It opens portals! Rips holes in the space between realms!"



Tyvar stared uncomprehendingly at her. Kaya grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Kid, he's going to start a Doomskar!"

"Correction," came a voice from above them. "I already started it."

A bolt of searing flame shot down from the switchback of stairs above them; Kaya threw herself to one side just in time to feel the heat lick against her face.



*"Sword of the Realms", by Lie Setiawan.*

Grinning down at them from the ridge above was Tibalt. A curl of red, jittering flame wreathed one hand; in the other, he held that sword of shimmering, colorful glass.

"We've got to get that sword away from him," said Kaya. Another ball of flame arced through the air, turning the rock molten where Tyvar had been standing a moment before.

She went one way, and Tyvar went the other. Between the winding stairway path, wedges of black rock jutted from the mountainside, evidence of tectonic shifts as savage as any denizen of the realm. Tyvar used them as cover, keeping low, climbing the slope in athletic leaps and bounds.

For Kaya, things weren't so complicated. She beat a straight path for Tibalt, phasing through rock and fire and whatever else the devil threw her way; nimble as Tyvar was, she quickly pulled ahead of him.

Fifteen feet, then ten. Kaya slipped an axe from her belt and hurled it at Tibalt. It clipped his shoulder, sent him sprawling, and she drew the second axe. *Don't let him get up.*

She pushed herself over the ridge and lunged for Tibalt, focused entirely on reaching him, on the subtle shifts in her footing to let her bring all her weight down with the blow. She saw, too late, the deep breath that was filling his chest, the puffing up of those red cheeks.



The smoke poured from his mouth in a great and sudden torrent, blanketing the oversized stairs in an instant. It rushed over Kaya in a wave, stinging her eyes, burning her throat. Blind, she swung anyway—but the axe only clanged off rock.

Kaya pulled her cowl over her mouth and nose with one hand, kept the axe leveled and ready with the other, but all she could see was the smoke. Throughout, little orange cinders danced with malice. It seemed to cling to her, to seek out gaps in the cloth she breathed through, to pry at her squinting eyelids. Anywhere it touched bare skin, it burned.

She did her best to shut out the pain and discomfort, to focus on her hearing. Where was Tibalt? Where was Tyvar?

It's not too late to run.

The thought seemed to come from nowhere.

*It's done anyway. Tibalt already started the Doomskar. What are you still doing here?*

Gradually, the burning across her skin, in her lungs and eyes, grew worse. An odd fatigue had settled into her limbs, too—the hand-axe she held out, once so light and balanced, seemed to drag her arm down now.

*This plane's problems aren't your problems. You owe these people nothing. Go on—jump through the Blind Eternities. Get out of here. Save yourself. It's what you're best at, after all.*

The thoughts rolled through her mind one after another, with Kaya powerless to stop them, and in spite of herself, she felt the impulse tugging at her, the magical energies building around her, preparing to carry her away.

*It would be so easy. There's nothing for you here anymore but pain.*

Something was wrong—beyond the burning smoke, beyond the unnatural exhaustion that now threatened to drag Kaya to her knees. There was a voice in her head. A voice that almost—but not quite—sounded like her own.

There was a movement in the swirling smoke to her right; she saw the sword first, those beautiful colors trapped in glass, arcing toward her. Tibalt, swinging to kill. "You couldn't just *leave,* could you?"

She tried to raise her axe to block the blow, but it was so heavy—her arm, so sluggish. Kaya knew already that it would arrive too late. On an animal instinct, Kaya squeezed her eyes shut.

There was a resounding clang. Not exactly the sound of metal biting into flesh. No pain, either. Funny.



Kaya opened her eyes. Between her and Tibalt stood Tyvar. He'd caught that shimmering god-light sword on the dagger fixed to his bracer. Tibalt was struggling to push through, arms shaking with the effort, and getting nowhere. "Who in all the hells are *you*?"

With a quick and practiced gesture, Tyvar knocked the sword from Tibalt's hands. "Tyvar Kell. Prince of the elves. Greatest hero in Kaldheim."

The fog was starting to clear from Kaya's head now; she could *feel* where Tibalt had slipped into her mind, the way he had cloaked his presence in her own doubts and fears. The more she listened, the worse the fatigue and pain grew. It was almost artful, this magic—nothing like the clumsy, slapdash work she'd seen from him so far.

But then why had Tyvar been immune to it? He'd charged into the smoke, same as her. Why weren't his doubts, his insecurities, slowly sucking the life from him? Unless—unless he didn't have any?

*By the ancients, she thought. He's too young—too arrogant—too* dumb *to doubt himself. And thank all the gods of Kaldheim for that.*

In front of her, Tibalt scrambled back, red fire curling around one hand, but Tyvar grabbed him by his collar and flipped him over one shoulder, crashing the Planeswalker into the edge of one stone stair. The breath went out of Tibalt in a hacking cough, and with it went the smoke and

the fire, dwindling to nothing around them. Tyvar pressed his brass blade to Tibalt's neck. "Now, fiend, you will tell us what you've done."

At that, Tibalt managed a grin. "Go see for yourself," he croaked.

Kaya felt the energy gathering around him, the magic a sharp, acrid taste in the air. She tried to shout, but then there was the sound of a fire catching on dry wood, and the back of Tibalt's eyes lit orange. Like burning paper, his body dissolved into a mass of orange cinders, and Tyvar stumbled back.

"He," sputtered the elf. "He—"

"Planeswalked. Yeah," said Kaya, pushing herself off the ground. "Tyvar—thanks. For helping me there."

"Of course," he said, recovering. "But what if he returns?"

"He can't. Not for a while, anyway, and if he does, he'll be no threat to us. It takes a lot of magic to jump planes. He'll need a while to recharge."

"Ah," said Tyvar. "So we've won? It's over?"

Kaya glanced up toward the peak of the mountain, where those strange lights continued to coruscate and ripple across the ash-clouded sky. "No. I don't think it is."



On any other day, maybe the sight of a vast well of blood resting in the cone of the mountain below them might have been worth a moment's regard. But from the peak of the Bloodcrag, they had a clear view of the tear in the sky. It stretched, end to end, from where they stood to the middle of the lake of magma they had crossed; Kaya didn't know whether the heavy clouds of ash had blocked their view or whether it was new, a fresh wound made during their initial ascent. Along the edges of the tear, spilling out and covering the sky, radiated that shifting, multicolored light.

"By all the realms," muttered Tyvar.

Inside, Kaya could see a shifting, kaleidoscopic tableau of landscapes: craggy, towering mountains, fortresses of ice, plains of tall yellow grass. It felt as though she was seeing into the whole of the Multiverse, all the planes rent open in one utterly wrong stroke.

"Any chance you know how to undo that? Maybe with the sword?" she said. They'd brought it up with them, tucked into Tyvar's belt.

He shook his head. "My talents *do* have their limits, you know."

Despite everything—the iron reek of blood, the tear in the sky—that forced a laugh from Kaya. It died in her throat, though, when she saw the first figures rising from the fiery lake far below them. With each beat of their leathery wings, they rose higher into the air, bearing swords and spears, halberds and hammers, the weight of the weapons and armor



*"Varragoth, Bloodsky Sire", by Ian Miller.*



dragging at them but not keeping them from their steady, dreadful progress. There must have been thousands of them, all headed for that hole in the sky. Their invitation to pillage, to burn, to destroy not just one world but all the worlds this plane had to offer. At their center, rising from a ship with two vast masts of fire, was a demon that dwarfed all the others. In one hand he dragged a great double-bladed axe; he seemed to be beating his wings with manic fury, bowling past others in his need for escape. She knew his name, even before Tyvar whispered it, dumbstruck. She had heard it spoken enough times during her time with the Omenseekers: Varragoth.

Kaya turned to Tyvar, who was still staring at the unholy flock rising before them. "Tyvar, we have to go. This plane is about to go to pieces."

He didn't seem to hear her. "We need to stop them. We need to warn whoever's on the other side!"

"Tyvar," she said, gently. "It's over. You're a great warrior, don't get me wrong, but the greatest warrior in history couldn't change what's about to happen." Already, she could see demons crossing into the gap, their great wingbeats bringing them to new prey. "We tried. Now all we can do is stay alive. Get to the next plane, try to do better—"

She tried to put a hand on his back, but he wrenched away from her. "So this is what your kind does—disappear as soon as the world pitches

a direction you don't care for. Run as soon as things get hard. You and that Tibalt aren't so different in the end."

The words hit her harder than she expected. By the time she'd started shaping together a reply—something about not being so hardheaded, something about going to get yourself killed—Tyvar had already opened an Omenpath. He turned to her. "If this is what it means to be a Planeswalker, I want no part in it."

With that, he stepped through the doorway.

The energy Kaya had been gathering to planeswalk still hung in the air around her, a nameless pressure lacking a valve. She could still go. She *should* still go. It was the smart choice. It was her code.

But she couldn't help thinking about those voices in her head. How she'd been hearing them, in one way or another, since long before she'd met Tibalt or Tyvar.

Kaya swore, took a deep breath, and stepped in after him.

# EPISODE V
# The Battle for Kaldheim

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THE HUMAN CLANS ATTEMPT TO DEFEND THEMSELVES
AGAINST HORDES OF DRAUGR, ELVEN ARMIES,
AND RAMPAGING GIANTS.
GOOD LUCK, HUMAN CLANS.

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Far above the Feltmark, wheeling between the columns of smoke that rose from the many chimneys of the Beskir Stronghold, a raven sailed through the air. A raven, it is known, can cover a hundred miles in a day, and this one had done just that. It had passed over the high ridges of the Tusk mountains, seen the fire giants scaling the cliffsides while Tuskeri braveswords rolled cut logs and boulders to knock them back to earth. The raven, with one black and inscrutable eye, had watched the Skelle gather in their marshes and swear oaths by blood, readying for war. It had followed the coast for some time, where longships dotted the horizon, the greatest fleet of the age riding the wind westward, to the one place in Bretagard that all flock to in times of crisis.



*"Bretagard Stronghold", by Jung Park.*

The raven landed on a thatched roof in one of the inner courtyards, past the thick walls that ringed the fortress. Below, among the rising sounds of weapons pressed to grindstone, of mail brushing plate, two voices stood out. The raven, as was its way, paused to listen.

"We've lost the eastern fold, and it'll be the whole damn Aldergard soon," said the older one. His hair and beard were the color of fresh snow; everything else was weathered, leathery, rugged. On his back was a broad



shield made of a material that seemed to shimmer in the right light. "I've never seen so many trolls in one place. And working together, too."

The younger one laughed. "The Kannah are having trouble with a few Hagi? One of mine brought down a *demon* yesterday. Now all the youth are trying to claim the next." From the side of this one's head jutted an odd, bony protrusion—like a sabretooth had tried to bite into his skull but lost their fang partway through.

"If it's such a party, then what are you doing here?" grunted the older one.

The other shrugged. "A clan leader has certain obligations, you know."

Two guards uncrossed their spears before the pair and pushed open a set of heavy wooden doors, each one taking the full weight of the warrior before they groaned open.

"Arni Brokenbrow, of the Tuskeri, and Fynn, the Fangbearer, of the Kannah," one of the guards barked. Inside, four figures were seated at the table. Inga Rune-Eyes, leader of the Omenseekers, had already arrived, and this fortress belonged to Sigrid, God-Favored. The other two—a dark-skinned woman and an elf with red braids—were strangers.

Fynn, the older of the pair, grabbed the axe from his belt. "What in Koma's breath is *he* doing here?"

The guards, partway through closing the door, scrambled for their weapons, but Sigrid held up a hand. “Inga?”

Rune-Eyes stood from her seat. “This is Tyvar, of Skemfar, and Kaya, of—elsewhere. They are friends. And we are in need of all the friends we can find right now.”

“No serpent-kissing elf can call himself my friend,” growled Fynn. “Least of all their prince.”



*“Fynn, the Fangbearer”, by Lie Setiawan.*



He hadn’t drawn his weapon yet, but he looked ready to. Tyvar hadn’t even risen from his chair, though. “It isn’t just the humans that will die if the elves go to war. But I suppose you’ll be the one to talk down my brother, then, when he arrives at the head of an army.”

“I’ll talk him down. About six feet down.”

“Enough,” barked Sigrid, her voice a gavel. “I didn’t invite you into my hold to insult my guests, Fynn. I invited you to discuss how our people might live out the week.”

Grudgingly, Fynn dropped himself into one of the chairs surrounding the long table. Arni joined him. “So! I’m assuming there’s some sort of plan, and that it will require acts of stupendous daring and bravery? I understand the odds are against us.” About this, he didn’t seem terribly concerned.

Sigrid smiled thinly. “Trolls, demons, giants—both frost and fire—rampaging through the realm. And now I hear reports of draugr, which means the Dread Marn, Karfell’s dead army, has returned. Yes, I would say the odds are against us. But we have weapons yet with which to fight.”

“Other than a mouthy elf?” muttered Fynn.

“Yeah,” said Kaya. From under the table, she lifted a sword that seemed to be forged from glass; caught within the translucent blade were an ar-

ray of blues and greens that seemed to ripple and glow before their eyes. She set it on the table with a dull clink.

"Is that—" said Fynn.

"The Sword of the Realms," said Sigrid evenly.

"Koll must have finally finished the bloody thing," said Arni, whistling.

"He did," said Sigrid. "But he took the secrets of how to wield it to the grave."

A moment of silence passed between them. Fynn was the first to break it. "But without that knowledge, it's nothing but a blade. A Tyrite-forged one, aye, but no number of fine swords that can stop a Doomskar."

"There is one, yet, who can wield it," came a voice from the darkened corner of the room where the light of the braziers didn't quite reach. A fifth figure stepped from the shadows—an old man, in a long, heavy traveling cloak. There was a raven perched on his shoulder. "The god for whom the sword was meant. Halvar, God of Battle."

From his eyes spilled a faint glow—the same light frozen inside the blade of the sword. Before Alrund, even Fynn was speechless.

"Halvar's our man," said Kaya. "But getting to him is going to take some doing."





*"Strategic Planning", by Donato Giancola.*

Arni, recovered from having met one of the gods of Kaldheim, kicked his feet up on the table. "A perilous quest, then. Now we're getting to the good part."

Halvar, Alrund had told them, wasn't far from the Beskir fortress. He was, after all, the god of battle, and battle was all around them now. As the raven flies, he was quite close.

*I only wish the old man hadn't meant it literally,* thought Kaya, grabbing a fistful of black feathers and tightening her grip.

The bird that rode on Alrund's shoulder was named Hakka; Kaya knew that much. He hadn't told them the names of the giant ravens that now carried them through the sky, great tracts of grassland whipping away with each beat of their vast black wings. Or maybe he had—admittedly, Kaya hadn't been able to focus much during introductions, her attention inextricably drawn to those great glassy eyes. There was an intelligence in them she couldn't deny, and a curiosity. Not to mention that great curving beak, which could probably snap her in two if it wanted. On one rode Sigrid, Fynn, and Inga—on the other, Arni, Kaya, and Tyvar.

"Look!" she heard Tyvar shout over the rushing wind.

The first thing she saw was the tear in the world, a streak of icy white cutting through the amber fields below. The perspective looked all wrong, like someone had laid another plane flat across this one. Steam billowed out as the air of that frozen place met the warmer air of Bretagard, and from the edge of the opening thin, rotting figures dragged themselves hand over hand into the human realm. Ahead of them, across a rolling carpet of yellowing grass, stretched a thousand shambling forms. Draugr, they had called them. *A zombie by any other name.* Towering above the rank and file were a few massive figures covered in long, ropy hair—Torga trolls, Kaya recognized, though these ones looked like they had seen



better days. Hard to tell from up here, but they had the same unsteady gait as the foot troops. Undead too, then.

All of them—draugr and Torga, big and small—shuffled toward the same thing: a thickly built wooden bridge, fording a broad white-water river. On the far side, Kaya could make out a hamlet of little huts, cobbled paths, a waterwheel. No people that she could make out, but that made sense with what was on their doorstep. It seemed miraculously whole, untouched. The solitary figure on the bridge had made sure of that.

From here, Halvar didn't look like much. He didn't radiate that spooky god-light in the same way Alrund did; compared to the gash in the world spilling blue, green, and purple light into the sky, he seemed hardly remarkable. A miniscule figure, from this height, in dulled iron armor. Before him, on the near side of the bridge, was a mound of destroyed draugr nearly waist-high.

"We have to get to the bridge," yelled Kaya, hoping Tyvar would hear it and the giant bird they were on would somehow understand it. There was no way to turn back the clock, to suck this undead army back into their frozen world, but the Sword of the Realms was strapped across her back; if they could reach Halvar, they could at least stop this from getting any worse.

But Tyvar's eyes, as he turned to face her, locked on to something else. A shadow passed over her, then—the bird's glossy black feathers grew marginally darker as something moved between her and the sun above them.

"Watch out!" said Tyvar, right before the blow struck; a crunching sound, an avian shriek, and suddenly Kaya was knocked from her perch and into open air.

She saw the rest in individual moments, separate frames as she fell: the raven, its wing bent into an unnatural position; Tyvar and Arni, arms



*"Varragoth, Bloodsky Sire", by Tyler Jacobson.*



wheeling around them as they started to fall, grabbing for handholds that weren't there; above them all, a massive horned figure with two leathery, ragged wings, carrying a heavy-looking, long-handled axe.

It was closer than she had seen him before; even falling down, down, away from the demon, she could make out the tangle of bruise-colored flesh that hung in the shape of a wild beard; she could see thousands of years of imprisonment boiling out of those crazy eyes. Varragoth swung again, driving his axe into the raven's side, and then Kaya was turning over and over, the wind deafening in her ears, falling, falling.

*Think.*

*Think, think, think!*

She looked down, squinting against the wind—below her, the river crashed and surged. Hitting water after a fall from this height wouldn't be much better than hitting stone. She could survive the fall, though—her ability to slip in and out of mortal flesh would make sure of that. Could Tyvar? She didn't know. She couldn't count on it. Kaya straightened her body and fanned out her arms and legs to slow her fall. She tried to focus on the sky around her rather than the ground rapidly rising below. Arni, it turned out, was close to her, maybe five feet off and bellowing some insane war whoop as he tumbled toward death. Tyvar was maybe twen-

ty feet out, all that grace and balance useless as he spun through the air, totally out of control.

She grabbed hold of Arni, swinging one arm through the strap keeping his broadsword across his back. "Straighten your body and push back your arms!" she screamed over the roaring wind.

He did so, and she followed suit; immediately they were falling faster, angling toward Tyvar. Below, the grass was no longer vague yellow shading but waving stalks; she could make out the blocky steel blades of the draugr, their armor still rimed with frost. They were almost to the river. She couldn't miss—it had to be now.

They collided with Tyvar about five seconds before they hit the surface. Another second to summon up the energy she needed; one more to turn all three of them insubstantial. The last three seconds were just enough moments to spare.

Darkness and cold swallowed them—it wasn't just the chill of the water rushing all around them, either. The cold filled her, *was* her. No hot rush of blood through veins, no air in her lungs, no steady heartbeat reminding her with each thrum that she was alive. For those few seconds, Kaya knew what it was to be dead, and to linger on—a ghost, a spirit.

With effort, she pulled them all back to corporeal form, and at once, they were tumbling and turning in the current. Kaya had no idea which



way was up, no clue where to swim. All she could do was cling to Arni and Tyvar, keeping them one big, drowning unit. She opened her eyes; all around her was rushing water. At the edge of her vision, in the greater darkness of the broad river, she thought she saw something move—a sleek, nimble body in the waves.

Arni was the one that caught the branch along the bank; with Kaya's help, they hauled Tyvar out of the water. He was still gasping for air, clutching his arms as if freezing. It was lucky, she guessed, that the drau-



*"Grim Draugr", by Grzegorz Rutkowski.*

gr on all sides seemed too surprised to take a swing at them before she'd found her footing again.

Kaya dodged the first blow, parried the second. She knocked away a sword swing meant for Tyvar, took the draugr's arm off at the elbow. "Get up, kid!"

They were slow, but there was no end to them, and on all sides, they were beginning to realize there were enemies in their midst. Kaya split a white, frost-bitten skull with one of her hand-axes and tugged it free barely in time to knock aside a spear thrust. She stepped backward, nearly tripped—and immediately Arni was there in front of her, hacking off limbs with great wheeling sweeps from his broadsword. *Does that guy get turned ethereal every day?* Kaya thought, bewildered.

Arni thrust his blade into a draugr's ribcage, held it out at arm's length while it clawed uselessly at him, and turned back to her. Sure enough, he was grinning. "You two go on ahead. I'll keep this lot busy. Least I could do, after you broke my fall with that spooky magic of yours."

One warrior against all these draugr; those odds weren't great. *Then again, he seems like a man who likes to gamble.*

Kaya pulled Tyvar to his feet, and together, they ran through the gap Arni had carved out. In the distance she could see the bridge—almost close enough to touch, with nothing but an army of undead between them.



She could rush ahead if she started phasing, but she had been immaterial for a long time during their "landing" and didn't know how much more her body could take. There was Tyvar to consider, too.

At least the draugr in this section of the field seemed less dense. Together they ran, pausing only briefly to shatter a ribcage or lop off a frozen limb, the Sword of the Realms jostling the whole time in its sheath against Kaya's back. Behind them, in the distance, she could see standards of the human clans as they clashed with the edges of the draugr horde, but there hadn't been time to marshal more than a few raiding parties, and more draugr spilled out of that rift with each passing minute.

Over the dead-choked fields rose a sound Kaya had never heard before. A few changes of pitch and tone, and it might have been the call of some vast night bird, the howl of a dire wolf; it had that wild and eerie quality to it as it carried across the plains, and Tyvar froze.

"That is no draugr horn," he said, breathless.

It sounded again, and Kaya followed it to the gentle curve of a hill some ways off. A line of figures had begun to form—most carried shields of bronze, stained with the green patina of age. Some carried spears, some swords. Kaya only needed to see how Tyvar looked at them to know who they were: the elves of Skemfar, marching to war.



*"Harald, King of Skemfar", by Collin Estrada.*

"Tyvar, we don't have time for this. We have to move," said Kaya, but Tyvar seemed rooted to the spot.

"Kaya, the humans aren't the only victims of Tibalt's treachery," he said, turning to her. "I can't let my people fight and perish for his lie. My brother stands at the head of that army—I know I can make him see reason."

For all Tyvar's bravado, he had a good heart in there. "Alright, kid. Get moving, then."



"Will you be okay?"

Kaya grinned, tried to look confident. "I made my professional reputation killing the undead. I'll be fine."

He nodded. With that, he tore off.

It wasn't a lie she'd told him, exactly—but this would have been much easier if the draugr were undead of the more spectral variety. Kaya pushed forward, hacking through when she needed to, running when she didn't. The sounds of metal clashing against metal were all around her now, as well as the distant screams of men and women, and she found her heart beating louder and louder in her ears. Everything seemed to be happening slower than usual, each breath feeling like an hour, a year.

An earth-trembling footstep shook her from her trance, freezing her where she stood. Between Kaya and her path to the bridge stood one of the Torga trolls she had seen from the air. This close, she could smell the almost sweet scent of rot and see where patches of once mossy fur had gone brittle white or fallen out altogether. Something had opened a great gash in the creature's flank—she could see three slab-like ribs clear as day, a sickly blue light emanating from somewhere deep inside the troll. Its eyes were clouded, dead, but they seemed to fix on her nonetheless. It exhaled sharply, a gout of white mist hissing from between two blackened tusks.

Just as it began to move toward her, there was a splashing sound to Kaya's left. She saw, hanging in the air, the most unlikely thing: a dolphin. Oddly majestic, almost pristine in the middle of all the chaos and carnage. It was arcing through the air toward her, gray skin wet and sleek—it must have jumped from the whitewater rapids next to her, Kaya realized. Seamlessly, that shining skin billowed back into the shape of a cloak, and the creature landed on now human legs; the cloak settled on slender, brown shoulders. In front of Kaya and the troll stood a middle-aged woman with wild, unbound hair. She said nothing, only raised her hands. As her eyes glowed with shifting, multicolored light, Kaya realized she was looking at one of the gods of Kaldheim.



*"Cosima, God of the Voyage", by Andy Brase.*



Behind her, a wall of water rose from the river, white and thrashing like an animal. It swept over the undead Torga and a handful of draugr. The wave carried all of them off as it rolled down the field, one more combatant in the mad battle across Bretagard.

"Who are you supposed to be?" said Kaya, dumbstruck. She tasted salt in the air.

The woman in front of her brushed her hair out of her face. Her eyes had gone back to a dark, earthy color. "You were on my ship not long ago. How did it treat you?"

Cosima. Goddess of the sea. "Oh. Uh, our acquaintance was brief."

"She is a flighty one," said Cosima thoughtfully. From under her cloak, she drew a long, curved sword. "Now then. Alrund did not send me to visit."

Kaya merely nodded. *Badass sea goddess. Okay.* "We have to get to Halvar."

"Lead the way," said Cosima.

More draugr had assembled before them; these fell before the pair like wheat to the scythe. They were close now; not a hundred feet off, she could see Halvar at the head of the bridge, knocking draugr about with swings of his shield-arm, pitching them into the white river below. She was almost there.

She didn't register the shadow passing over her until it smothered her in darkness; suddenly something pulled sharply at Kaya's leather armor, yanking her to the side just in time to avoid the ugly iron axe biting into the dirt where she'd stood moments ago.

Cosima, having dragged her out of harm's way, was now pulling her up to stand. Between the pair and the bridge—ten, twelve feet tall, fronds of gray flesh curling and waving from his arms, his chest, his face, grinning a hideous frozen grin, was Varragoth. He beat his wings once, then settled on the ground.

"He didn't have wings last time," muttered Cosima.

"That blade. I know what you carry," he hissed, his voice rust and blood. "I swear on the endless lives I have taken that you will not trap me again in that desolate—"

The first axe, thrown, hit him on the brow, clipping one horn, causing boiling, tarry blood to bubble around where it had stuck. The second axe, this one in Kaya's hand, drove into his knee. Varragoth howled in pain and grabbed at her, but Kaya danced out of his grasp. She even managed to snatch her hand-axe from his forehead as he bent over. "I know you're some kind of scary story people tell their kids, but I'm not from around here," Kaya said, once she was a safe distance away.



Varragoth bellowed in frustration and lunged toward her, a single beat of those huge wings driving him half the distance. She'd landed two clean hits, but neither seemed to slow him down much.

Kaya ducked below a scything axe blow, feeling the wind of it whip across her face. Then Cosima was there, swinging her blade in great curving arcs, carving through Varragoth's iron armor like water. If the wounds bothered the demon, he showed no sign.

Behind him, more dark, winged shapes descended from the sky, landing between them and the bridge. She tried to ignore the deep weariness in her limbs, shifting her grip on the hand-axes. There was no time to worry about whatever was on the other side of Varragoth. If she couldn't get through him, nothing else mattered.

She and Cosima moved forward together; the sea goddess went low, and Kaya went high. Cosima caught the blunt side of the demonic great-axe on a backswing, sending her flying backward, but Kaya chopped into his shoulder. He didn't fall or falter; instead, he grabbed her around one leg. If she hadn't phased—a considerable effort, now, even on a smaller part of her body—he would have beaten her against the ground, breaking her spine and more besides.

She tumbled free, coming up just in time to dodge another blow of the axe. How long could she keep this up? Behind him, through the crowds

of draugr, more horned, hulking forms advanced. *It's not too late,* said a little voice inside herself. *You could always leave.*

Kaya set her weight into a balanced stance and took a deep breath. Yeah, she could. But that didn't mean she would.

The first of Varragoth's demons stepped out of the crowd, shoving draugr aside. There were two more behind him, and who knew how many beyond that. She bent her knees, prepared again to leap forward—and was interrupted by the familiar sound of a horn blowing, much closer this time.



*"Warhorn Blast", by Bryan Sola.*



They crashed into the draugr and the demons both, from the east, where the rising sun shone on their armor and shields, making the ancient, tarnished brass seem—for a moment—new again. Elves, she realized. A line of pike-bearers set their hafts against the ground, forming a wall between Kaya and the demons. They were *helping* her.

"Need a hand?" came a voice from behind her.

Tyvar sat on what looked to Kaya like some sort of reindeer, festooned in the same greenish brass armor as the rest of the elves. Next to him rode another elf—taller and more slender, with the same red hair but a severity to his features she had never seen on Tyvar.

"Kaya, allow me to introduce Harald, King of the elves of Skemfar, uniter of the tribes of Wood and Shadow. Also, my older brother," said Tyvar, grinning.

"Your Majesty, I am *very* pleased to meet you."

Before he could speak, there was a metallic crunching sound and a scream. Varragoth had charged the line, crushing one elven pike-bearer entirely underfoot and cutting another cleanly in half with that massive axe. Several pikes were buried in the gaps of his armor; he didn't seem to mind. Emboldened, the other demons were advancing now, crossing blades and hammering at shields with terrible strength.

Tyvar spurred his reindeer into motion, gracefully dismounting behind the elves holding back the demonic onslaught. He put his hands on the backs of their armor, and Kaya watched the plating seem to grow, contouring to perfectly fit their bodies, doubling over itself to grow thicker. One demon feinted past the shield, raking his sword across an elf's reinforced breastplate, but the blow only threw up a shower of sparks as it skittered off. *Good friend to have,* thought Kaya.

More elves poured in from behind Harald, filling in the gaps in the line. Kaya allowed herself a moment to breathe.

"So," she said to the elf king. "Your brother is—"

"A fool," said Harald in a clipped, short tone. "And a braggard. But not a liar. He prevented me from making a mistake, here. I am thankful for that."

"I'm pretty thankful myself."

"He says you must get to the bridge." Harald extended a hand down to her. "I can bring you."

"What about Tyvar?"

They glanced back to the battle, where the elves clashed with demons and draugr; Tyvar, his arms now gleaming that ancient brass color, danced around a furious Varragoth. He actually managed to leap *over* one long, sweeping strike to crack the demon across the jaw with one metallic fist.



"I'm certain he's having the time of his life. Now come," said Harald.

He pulled her onto the reindeer. It immediately bounded forward; she had to grab hold of the elf king's waist just to keep herself mounted.

The creature moved through the chaos of battle with the grace and nerve of any trained warhorse. Sometimes draugr not engaged with the elven army would lean over to take a swing at them; Kaya knocked away the stiff attempts with her hand-axe. Off to the side, a demon with a gnarled black bow drew back its string—but before he could fire, Harald waved a hand and the bow sprouted flowers and vines that grew rapidly around the surprised demon's arms and up toward his throat.

Before she knew it, they were there. Aside from the pile of draugr corpses arrayed in a fan around, and covering, the entrance, the bridge would have fit in anywhere; it looked utterly normal amid the total pandemonium around them. On the first few wooden planks, looking as tired as she felt, was a man in simple, stripped-down armor, carrying a wooden shield ringed with steel. He looked up at them as the reindeer clopped closer. "You're not here to try and cross this bridge too, are you?"

"No. You're Halvar?" asked Kaya.

"Aye. That's me. I recognize the king of Skemfar, there. Who does that make you?"

"I'm Kaya. I've got something that I think belongs to you."

She pulled the sword from its wrappings across her back; in the strange light of the Doomskar, it seemed to shimmer all the stronger. Kaya tossed him the sword, which turned end over end through the air, finally landing in his palm as if it had always belonged there.

"The sword Koll was forging before—before he fell." He shook his head. "I never thought it would be an elf returning it to me."

"And I never thought I'd be helping one of the usurper gods," snapped Harald. "But it seems you're the only one who can set this mess right."

Halvar nodded. "Yes. With this sword, I think I can. But I'll need time."

"We can give you that," said Kaya.

"Hold the bridge until I can separate the realms once more."

"What is so important about this accursed bridge?" said Harald. "What, precisely, is on the other side?"

"People," said Halvar simply. Then he sat, cross-legged, the sword across his lap.

Kaya slid off the back of the reindeer. The draugr, it seemed, had finally reacted to the elven army at their flanks and were pushing back. They had greater numbers, and the difference only grew as more poured forth



from the great rift in the world. In the distance, she could see the banners of the Tuskeri, the Beskir, the Omenseekers, the Kannah—but they were far from where she stood. Halvar, on the bridge, had gone deep inside himself. His eyes were closed, and the sword began to glow from somewhere within.

The closest draugr had formed into ranks, marching toward Kaya and Harald at a steady pace. Towering over the draugr, she could see more undead trolls lurching in their direction, the flesh of one's head peeled all the way back to reveal a bare, ice-encrusted skull. Above them all, demons pulled themselves aloft on leathery wingbeats.

"This is folly," muttered Harald, taking a tighter grip on the reins as his reindeer shuffled back and forth, sensing danger.

"Yeah," said Kaya, pulling the axes Tyvar had given her from her belt. "Probably." She wasn't going anywhere, though.

She was watching the demons rise on those black wings—that's why she saw it. A roiling, stretching pattern across the sky, like the very air was wearing thin. It began to tear, spilling that divine light—another rift in the world, like the one the draugr still spilled out of. There was something different about this one, though. Where the sky was held taut, she could make out something, pressing into the back of the developing rift like a hand against cloth. With a sound like thunder, it tore open.



*"Koma's Coil Token", by Simon Dominic.*

The thing that emerged from the rift had features she recognized—flat nostrils, a coiled body, arcing fangs laced with venom—but at this scale, they appeared alien and strange. It wasn't simply massive, it was *continental*. Not just a snake, but *the* snake; anything else a pale imitation, a lesser copy. It looked big enough to coil around any of the branches of the World Tree. *Which it probably does,* Kaya thought.

"By the Einir," whispered Harald, next to her. "Koma. The Cosmos Serpent."



Even gravity seemed to fear that thing—it moved through the air almost inquisitively, casting a shadow across half the battlefield as it glided overhead. Kaya saw it snap a hulking demon out of the air as if it were a mosquito. All the chaos of battle slowed and quieted as everyone—undead, elf, and human—seemed to hold their breath while it passed.

As the serpent reached the rift into Karfell, it paused. Those great gaping nostrils flared once, then twice. With terrifying and sudden speed, it plunged into the tear in the world, crushing dozens of nearby draugr with an incidental sweep of its tail. Endless tracts of serpent seemed to slide into the icy rift before it was finally gone.

Kaya's relief was so great she almost didn't notice the other beings spilling out of the rift Koma had just torn open. Angels, it looked like, with great feathered wings of white and black and brown and red, armed and armored, many of them roaring with sudden and startling fury. Not angels, she realized after a moment—Valkyries. Inga had told her about them. Arbiters of judgement, guardians of the heroic souls forever fighting and feasting in Starnheim. They slammed into the demons from above, feathered wings tangling with leather membrane as they tumbled out of the air together or rebounded off clashing steel.

Only one figure among them wasn't winged; they dangled, in fact, from the arm of a Valkyrie, who was carrying them down close toward Kaya. Just before they reached the ground—maybe ten feet up—the wingless



*"Starnheim Unleashed", by Johannes Voss.*

one let go. The air around them seemed to harden, then, condensing into solid, reflective shards of—something. With a juggler's speed, they grabbed and threw three of them. Each one sunk into the chest of a massive, undead Torga. The trolls didn't just go down, though—they shattered, as if they'd been glass under a hammer.

"Neat trick," said Kaya. "Who are you?"

The stranger whirled on Kaya, another mirror-like shard in their hand. Kaya put her hands up on instinct; she'd seen what those could do.



"Who are you?" said the stranger. They didn't notice the draugr behind them, hefting a chipped and ancient-looking greatsword. "Behind you!" Kaya shifted the grip on her axe and threw.

The stranger twitched their head away from the arcing weapon—in the right direction, thankfully. The axe slammed into the draugr's skeletal face, knocking it to the ground. After a moment, they both let out a breath.

"I'm Kaya," she said. "You got a name?"

"Niko. Niko Aris."

That didn't sound like the name of a Kaldheimr. "Great. We'll handle the rest of the introductions later."

Kaya turned back toward the mass of draugr and demons. Something was surging through the crowd toward them, knocking corpse-like soldiers into the air as it barreled their way. Varragoth—who else?—crashed free of the ranks of draugr, looking more like a wild beast than a demon jarl now. The iron armor he'd been wearing was warped, gouged, and broken; somewhere along the way he'd lost his axe. He was bleeding from a dozen different wounds now, but he was still upright. Clinging to his back, red hair darkened with blood and eyes unfocused, was Tyvar.

Harald hissed a word; snakes sprung from the ground, their scales stitched with the same runic lettering she'd seen over Tyvar's own mag-



*"Shard Token", by Aaron Miller.*

ic. They wrapped round Varragoth's legs, binding him—until he ripped them apart bare-handed. Niko threw a mirrored shard toward the demon, but he caught it on one of the iron plates still affixed to his arm, and it bounced off harmlessly.

As Varragoth stalked forward, Kaya saw Tyvar jab that brass blade of his into the demon's wing. He roared with pain and fury, reaching back to grab Tyvar—and taking his eyes, for a moment, off the rest of them. Which was just the opportunity Kaya needed.



Yeah, she was trying to do the hero thing now. But Kaya had spent a long, long time as an assassin.

The motion was fluid, easy, almost effortless; it required no phasing or magic powers. Kaya slipped in, past Varragoth's free arm, and swung an axe clean through his throat. The demon stumbled forward, both hands going to the mess of tarry blood suddenly spilling from his neck. He took one more step, reaching out a claw—and collapsed.

Kaya didn't even have time to exhale. Behind them came a sudden rushing sound, like water; above, the sky rippled with a wave of color, the same divine greens and purples and blues that surrounded the gods. She watched it sweep over the great rift on the battlefield—the one draugr were still pouring out of. Slowly, like a healing wound, the rift began to shrink and close.

Kaya didn't know if the draugr were mindless undead, but they were at the very least slow-witted; they didn't notice their reinforcements cut off. Across the field, she saw the demons who weren't engaged with the Valkyries take flight, panic finally overcoming their bloodlust. She turned to find Halvar standing, the Sword of the Realms pointing straight up into the air. Light poured from it in a dazzling, kaleidoscopic rush. Behind him, something caught her eye: motion, in one of the windows of the village across the bridge. There, the moony, wide-eyed face of a child stared,



*"Halvar, God of Battle", by Lie Setiawan.*

open-mouthed, as the god of battle sealed up the holes in the world. *Yeah,* thought Kaya. *This one will make a pretty good saga.*

"By the end," Tyvar was saying, as they crossed the now-quiet battlefield, made muddy from the tramping of countless boots, "I *personally* slew close to a hundred draugr, and three demons. It is my guess, though, that they will be telling tales of you for a long time. The woman who killed Varragoth—Slayer of the Bloodsky Sire. Why, I can almost hear it now!"



"Well, you make sure they get the details right," said Kaya. Everything hurt, every inch of her felt exhausted, but she still could not hold back a smirk.

"Actually," said Tyvar, pausing where he stood. "I'm not sure I'll be around to correct them."

Kaya raised an eyebrow. "Going somewhere?"

"I'd like to see what there is to see, out in your Multiverse."

"Oh? I thought you weren't interested in planeswalking."

Tyvar shrugged. "I rushed to judgement. And you've taught me its value. Had you not been here, I don't know what would have happened to our worlds. Chaos and destruction, I imagine, on an even greater scale. Perhaps there's a plane—a people—out there who need my help. As Kaldheim needed yours."

"What about being remembered? You're leaving all that glory on the table," said Kaya.

"Oh, I'm not worried about that anymore. I don't believe the people here will ever forget about what you did here," he said. That could still take her aback—that damned earnestness of his. He was guileless, this kid, an open book. *But he saved me. More than once.* She figured he'd be okay.

"Well," she said. "Maybe I'll see you out there."

"You will," said Tyvar, confident as ever. "And next time, it's *my* deeds that will go down in the sagas."

They came to a kind of crossroads—what had once been a crossroads, anyway. Now it was littered with the detritus of war: swords and spears, axes and helmets, the dead everywhere. Draugr, yes, but humans and elves, too. A moment of silence held in the air.

At the crossroads waited Inga Rune-Eyes, along with the other leaders of the clans of Bretagard—Arni, Sigrid, Fynn. By the Kannah leader stood that lanky stranger, the one who'd fallen from the sky. Niko, their name was.

Harald, too, was close by, flanked by a retinue of brass-armored honor guard. He and Fynn were staring at each other with open contempt, but at least weapons hadn't been drawn. With the Doomskar over, the gods had vanished. Off to other tasks, other duties—this corner of Kaldheim was hardly the only one that had suffered, Kaya supposed.

"Kaya. Tyvar," said Inga, by way of greeting. "You appear unharmed."

"More or less," said Kaya.

"I am glad."

"We broke the draugr lines and drove off their main body," said Sigrid. "Our scouts are pursuing the stragglers, but we'll never catch them all.





*"Sigrid, God-Favored", by Johannes Voss.*

Unless draugr melt in the warmer months, we'll be dealing with them for years. But any trouble they cause will be nothing compared to the demons that escaped."

"It's the same all across Bretagard. Probably all across the realms," said Inga. "The rifts were open for a long time. There's no telling what slipped through."

"I, for one, can't wait to find out," said Arni, grinning.

"As you say, all the realms have been changed by what happened here. The elves will return to Skemfar, to care for our own," announced Harald. "It will not be simple, even with the Doomskar finished. But the spells of our ancestors are capable of such feats and more."

"I suppose we'll have to get along until then," said Fynn, his jaw clenched tight.

"What will you do, Kaya?" asked Inga. "You still have a monster to catch, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Kaya. She hadn't forgotten about the thing in the cave, even though it seemed like a hundred years since her voyage with the Omenseekers. "No telling where it ended up after all this, though. And I've got a hunch that it can travel a lot farther than just between realms."

"What's beyond the realms?" asked Niko.

"The planes. It's all a bit complicated," said Kaya, waving her hand. She was too tired to explain it all again.

But Niko stepped forward, an odd eagerness in the stranger's eyes. "These planes. Is there one called Theros?"

Kaya looked at them in surprise. It was hard to believe that name mentioned here, now—but then, what about her day had been easy to believe? *Another one,* she thought, and sighed. "We should probably talk."



*"Esika, God of the Tree", by Collin Estrada.*



## EPILOGUE

Esika was dying. That wasn't supposed to happen—she was a god. It was by her hand, in fact, that the gods were freed from their mortality, from aging, from that final closing in of the dark. It was Esika who brewed the potion of divinity from the sap of the World Tree, the draught that kept death at bay, and yet she could feel the life escaping her. Running down her arms, her body, her face. She couldn't move her legs—she would have fallen to the ground by now, if the monster who had done this was not holding her up with one raw, flesh-colored claw. It tilted her to one side, regarding her with those dark, empty eye sockets. It had found her, this thing, in her sanctum, the place where she drew the sap and brewed the Cosmos Elixir. Nobody—nothing—had ever found her here.

A voice rose from the creature's throat, then—an odd amalgamation of tones and deliveries, as if the words had been stolen from other voices, synthesized into something new. "Not enough hunger in you. Not enough fear to survive. Soon, though."

It dropped her, then, and stalked back toward the well that ran to the heart of the tree.

Esika tried to raise her arms—she had never been a warrior, not like Halvar or Toralf, but she would fight with everything she had left to defend the World Tree. Her arms wouldn't obey her, though. She tried to shout, to call for help, but the only thing that came out was a bubbling, wet croak.

She watched, helpless, as the monster reached the well. What poison would it use? What corruption would it seed in this most sacred place?

To her surprise, it produced one of her own bottles. It must have taken one from her during their fight. She watched it dip the bottle into the well and hold it up to the light. Inside, the sap of the World Tree shimmered with all the colors of the realms. The most beautiful thing in this world—in any world, as far as Esika was concerned. If the monster was moved, it showed no sign.

"Sample acquired," it said, in that stitched-together voice. "I am ready to return."



*"Tyrite Sanctum", by Volkan Baga.*



To whom it was speaking, Esika had no idea.

The light in the room seemed to be fading, or maybe that was just her vision going out around the edges. Suddenly, there was a bright, strobing light in the center of the chamber—a hissing, sparking red glow that began as a single star and spread, slowly, into a circle. The circle widened—this was no Omenpath, she could see now. It was magic she had never seen before.

From the other side of the portal came a sound so unearthly and strange, she almost didn't recognize it as a voice: *"Welcome back, Vorinclex. We step ever closer to perfection."*



*"Vorinclex, Monstrous Raider", by Richard Luong.*



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# STRIXHAVEN
## SCHOOL OF MAGES

By Adana Washington

# EPISODE I
# Class Is In Session

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ROWAN AND WILL ARRIVE AT STRIXHAVEN,
HOPING TO DEVELOP THEIR INNATE GIFTS.
THEY QUICKLY FIND THEMSELVES IN THE
MIDDLE OF A DUEL BETWEEN RIVAL COLLEGES.

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*“Professor Onyx”, by Kieran Yanner.*

In the seemingly endless halls of the Biblioplex, where arcane knowledge from countless worlds lined shelves that had seen the rise and fall of empires, it seemed as though the only sound on the whole plane of Arcavios was the click of heel on stone. Professor Onyx, as she was known here, took a deep breath as she walked, inhaling the smell of old paper and the familiar ozone that always seemed to accompany magic. She needed a break from yet another insufferable meeting. For all the wisdom and learning in this place, it was populated with some remarkably thick-headed individuals.

Case in point: despite her considerable renown throughout the Multiverse, the other professors of Strixhaven hadn't recognized Liliana Vess when she introduced herself by an entirely different name. That hadn't surprised her. The school had always been that way, even since she'd been a student so many years ago; always wrapped up in its own little problems.

There was something calming about the weight of all those books, tomes, and scrolls around her. They seemed to wrap the place in a kind of hush. When the students arrived, the campus wouldn't be nearly so quiet—but for the moment, she savored the sense of solitude as she wandered the stacks.

A rustling sounded from up ahead. With a twinge of annoyance, Liliana pictured that perpetually chattering Codex; it most likely would be coming around the corner any minute now. As she rounded the next



bend, though, it wasn't the school's magically animated book she saw in the stacks.

"What are you doing?" she said.

The figure froze, their hand still reaching for another book to add to the pile at their feet.

Liliana stepped forward. "Students aren't to arrive for another—"

The words fell away as a streak of purplish light flew from the figure's hand. It grazed her arm, and the room seemed to suddenly buckle and sway as a sickening sensation spread throughout her body. With a gesture of will, she isolated the spell's effects, then quashed it. An amateur's work, yes—but none of the five colleges of Strixhaven taught magic of that nature.

"So," she said, a swirling current of deathly energy wreathing her hand as she called up her own magic. "You're not just here for summer sessions, I take it."

The figure was masked, she could see now—the space where the eyes should be covered only in smooth, flat metal. She'd heard of the Oriq, of course. The school was full of concerned whispers about the secret society of mages, the ones obsessed with forbidden magics and power at any cost. She hadn't expected to see one so soon, though. "I know what you are," she said.

The intruder looked toward the hall, then back at Liliana. “Then you know that your days are numbered.”

“Professor Onyx?” A vaguely familiar voice called from one of the nearby halls. Liliana spun in the direction of the sound, spell-charged hand raised. Dean Shaile Talonrook stood at the end of the hall, frowning. “Are you alright?”

When she turned back, the intruder was gone. Only the pile of books and scrolls on the floor showed that they had even been there.

Liliana collected herself, letting the magic dissipate. This was no time to draw more attention to herself. “Yes, I just—thought I saw something in the stacks. Have the faculty moved on to the next topic at hand?”

Dean Talonrook clicked her beak, her huge dark eyes filled with annoyance. “Dean Nassari is insisting on lengthening this year’s season of Mage Tower.”

Liliana frowned as she touched her arm where the spell had grazed her. Following Dean Talonrook back toward the Hall of Oracles, she glanced toward the books. “Surely we have bigger problems than Mage Tower.”

“Quite right, quite right!” crooned Dean Talonrook. Liliana hardly heard anything else she said.

…



In his chambers on Kylem, Will Kenrith stared helplessly at the towering stack of books on his bed. He’d been trying to choose which one to bring with him; at first it seemed certain that the tome regarding the Molten Prophecy was the best bet, but then he had remembered his favorite historical text, the accounting of Thadus the Healer. It was now an hour later and he was no closer to making a decision. He ran a hand through his short blond hair and glanced around the room, his eye catching on the glowing owl-shaped card on the table before he shook his head. There was no way to know how long it would be before they returned to Kylem. If they ever did.

The front door banged open, making Will flinch, and Rowan Kenrith strutted inside.

Will’s sister was just as tall as him, golden hair flowing down the red cape thrown over her shoulder. She frowned at Will, her gaze flicking to the books still spread out in front of him. “How are you still not ready?”

“Just… give me a minute,” he said. The Molten Prophecy. Definitely the Molten Prophecy.

Rowan picked up the invitation from the table across the room. Golden sparks floated up from it, the owl-shaped card glowing slightly in her hand. “You’ve had two weeks, Will. We need to get going.”

"The histories say Strixhaven has existed there for millennia. I'm sure it can wait a few more minutes for us." He glanced back at the stack. How could he make do without the accounting of Thadus? "Or, possibly hours."

Rowan groaned. "Kasmina is probably waiting on us right now."

Will sighed. Kasmina. The woman had told them plenty about all the things that Strixhaven had to offer. But her invitation had come out of nowhere, arriving only a few days after Garruk had been satisfied enough in their security to leave them on their own. They hadn't spent that much time with her on Kylem, and yet now they were supposed to go to an entirely new world on her word alone? Will turned back to his books. "I'm sure she'll be fine."

"We are *leaving*."

"Yes, I know. Today, certainly. I just need to—"

"No, Will." Rowan crumpled the invitation in her hand. "Now."

Will started to speak, but light burst through the room, tendrils of shadows swirling through the air. He squinted against it as it spread out to surround his sister. Behind her, specks of a bright blue sky shone in a web of verdant green leaves.

Rowan grinned and waved as she stepped into the light and disappeared.



Will clenched his jaw, fighting the pull at his core. But his connection to his sister was too strong. Soon the same tendrils of light and shadow erupted around him, washing the bed in its ethereal glow. Desperately, he grabbed the *Memoirs of Thadus the Healer* before the light could pull him to a new plane. All around him, then, was light and color and sound unlike any in Kylem. He was hurtling through nothing, through everything.

The first thing Will heard, wherever Rowan had taken them, was a high-pitched screech. It was coming from a blur of feathers and talons—a blur that was headed right for him. Will yelped, raising the Memoirs as a shield. The bird cut up into the air just before impact, whirling in a wide arc overhead.

They were in a clearing, surrounded by dwarfish, gentle-looking trees. At the edge of it stood a familiar figure carrying a crooked staff. After a moment, the bird dropped out of the sky and landed on the woman's shoulder.

"Hello, Will. Rowan." A spear of sunlight shone over her, setting her red hair alight. Kasmina gave something of a small smile, nodding to him. "I see you've both made it. And just in time. Classes will be starting soon."

Will looked around. He couldn't see anything but wilderness. "So, um. The school's nearby, then?"

"That's right." Kasmina turned and stepped toward the edge of the clearing. "Just beyond the forest. We'll see the first torch soon."

The *first torch?* Will wondered what that could mean.

"So what's this place like?" asked Rowan, breaking from Will's side to follow her. "Are there others like us? People who can move between worlds?"

"It's a very large campus," Kasmina said. "I'm sure there are others from different planes. Are you coming, Will?"

Will clenched his jaw, then marched along behind them.

...

There was, as Kasmina had said, a torch. What she hadn't said was that it was massive—more like a tower, really. The silver column rose high above the trees, piercing the brilliant blue sky. Even from the ground, Will could see the dancing flame at the top of the structure, its light rivaling that of the two suns that shone above it. As they reached the base, Will brushed a hand against the smooth metal. "How do they keep this thing lit?"

"Like most things on Arcavios," Kasmina said. "With magic."

Will glanced at the woman, annoyed. "Is this your home world?"

"I have been with the university for a long time, but no." Kasmina looked toward the horizon. "The next torch should be that way."



Will looked in the same direction, but all he could see were the green fields stretching out before them, broken only by a foot-worn path.

"If there are more torches, you'll have time to admire them later, Will. Come on," said Rowan, running ahead.

"Rowan, slow down," said Will. "We don't know who or what could be out here."

"Exactly!" she said, laughing.

They walked for a few miles before they reached the next torch. Will wondered how many of them there were across this plane—and what other, stranger lands they might tower over.

"The *Stormwright Texts* were a lot more thorough," Kasmina said, idly.

Will started at Kasmina's nearness. He frowned, then followed her gaze to the book at his side. He slid his hand over it, the worn cover giving him a sense of security. "I haven't heard of that one."

"Well, you can always consult it at the Biblioplex, once we reach Strixhaven."

"The what?" Rowan asked.

"The Biblioplex," Kasmina replied. "Home to the most extensive collection of knowledge regarding magic on any plane, anywhere."

"Oh," Rowan said, not bothering to hide her disappointment. "More books. Who cares?"

"Are you *joking*?" exclaimed Will. "We could learn anything! Everything! We've got to pick up the pace!"

Rowan rolled her eyes. "Now who needs to slow down, hm? Didn't you say there could be beasties out there?"

"My owl would alert me to any approaching danger," said Kasmina. "Neither of you have anything to fear."

Will glanced at the bird. It flexed its white wings as the light of the suns bounced off its round eyes. In a halting motion, it turned its head to look directly at him. Will frowned. "What's wrong with it?"

Kasmina looked ahead. "Nothing at all. Although she is getting a bit long in the tooth."

They walked the rest of the way in silence, with Will sneaking glances at the owl and her owner. But the bird always seemed to know when he was looking, and stared right back until Will couldn't keep himself from looking away. He noted the changing landscape as they moved, spotting a range of reddish-gray mountains in the distance.

Finally, Kasmina broke the silence as they passed another torch. "Welcome to Strixhaven."



As the trio crested the ridge, Will almost fell on his face at the sight before him. The campus stretched across the horizon, an intricate tangle of gleaming towers and flattened rooftops. A massive arch of jagged stones floated over what must have been the center of the institution, the ends of each stone pointing toward the ground smooth and flat, as if a giant blade had sheared away the bottoms.

Will stepped over to Rowan's side. "This is . . ."

"Bigger than our castle," Rowan said, her voice low.

That was one way to put it. The expanse of Strixhaven was bigger than all five castles on Eldraine put together. At the center of it, an enormous building rose above the rest. Sunlight glinted on its pointed arches, while large orbs floated over the shorter buildings.

"That's the Biblioplex," Kasmina said, coming to stand next to them. Will nodded absently, still speechless as he gazed out over the campus.

Rowan let out a short laugh, jolting him from his reverie. "This is going to be good."

Will smiled as he followed his sister toward the looming gates. They were massive enough to seem close, even though it would probably take them another hour of walking to arrive.



*“Mentor’s Guidance”, by Brian Valeza.*

He’d only taken a few steps when he abruptly realized Kasmina wasn’t following them. He and Rowan turned and looked back, curious. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Oh, no,” Kasmina said, shaking her head. She looked to her owl, and the bird took off, flying toward the Biblioplex. “I have other matters to attend to. Look for an owlin called Mavinda Sharpbeak. She will help you get settled in.”



“Oh.” Rowan cleared her throat. “Well, uh, thanks, then.”

Will bowed. “What my sister said. Thank you for bringing us here.”

“No need for such formality,” Kasmina said, smiling. “But you are most welcome.”

Will straightened and glanced at the woman once more before going to join his sister. “Rowan,” he whispered. “What do you think an ‘owlin’ is?”

…

On the other side of the gates, the campus bustled with activity as people hurried along the wide stone paths of Strixhaven. Some of the younger students wore identical uniforms, their gray cloaks fluttering behind them as they hurried along. The older ones were each garbed in unique outfits and moved in groups, like colors staying with like.

Red and blue ruffles and frills stood in stark contrast with the angles and swirls of the black and white coats and spats. Green and black overcoats and heavy boots seemed the complete opposite of the elegant, narrow red and white waistcoats and high collars. Will turned on his heels, taking in the kaleidoscope of moving colors and shapes.

“She’s strange, isn’t she?” said Rowan, absently. She didn’t seem nearly as bowled over by the spectacle all around them—if anything, she seemed lost in thought.

"Who?"

"Kasmina. Her and that owl." She shrugged. "I guess it doesn't matter anymore. She got us here, right?"

Before Will could form a response, shouts rang out from further inside the campus. In an instant, Rowan was off, running toward the voices.

"Hey!" called Will, starting after her. "Wait up!"



*"Academic Dispute", by Manuel Castañón.*



They raced around a corner, only to skid to a stop at the entrance to a smaller courtyard. Inside, a crowd watched as two groups of students flung spells across a grassy field, the bolts of light and color zipping and spiraling through the air as they narrowly missed their targets. One spell impacted a girl in red and blue and she started to float, kicking her legs helplessly and waving her arms. Laughter and applause rose up from the crowd.

Will stared in horror. "I thought this was supposed to be a *school*. This is—"

"Brilliant!" Rowan finished, grinning. She tugged on the sleeve of a nearby student, a young dryad in black and green. "Who's winning?"

"So far, Prismari seems to have the advantage," said the student. "But I wouldn't get too comfortable if I were them. Those Silverquills can be a vicious lot."

"Bloodthirsty battling, in the middle of the campus?" sputtered Will.

The dryad frowned. "This is just a duel. No one's actually going to get hurt. Not too badly, anyway."

"Okay, enough of this," said Will, trying to sound forceful. "Rowan, come on. We need to speak to—well, some kind of administrator. A schoolmaster, perhaps. There are classes to join, and surely books we need to acquire, and—"

Rowan stepped forward, ignoring him completely. Out on the field, a student had fixed his eyes on one of the Prismari in red and blue. His hands were raised, and his lips moved as he spoke in a low, focused tone. Between his fingers, curls of black ink began to form.

"Watch out!" shouted Rowan. She sent a jolt of electricity at the one preparing the ink spell. He yelped as it zapped him, causing the black ink he was conjuring to splash all over his uniform. More laughter and applause from the crowd. The Prismari student turned and looked to Rowan, surprised. "Thanks!"

Rowan grinned and started to respond; before Will could warn her, a coil of living ink swept her feet out from under her. She landed on her back, coughing as the air rushed out of her chest for a moment, and peered up to see who had hit her—a student in black and white robes, same as the one she'd shocked. "Stay out of this, first-year," hissed the student.

The air around Rowan snapped and crackled with electricity as she called up another charge. "Want to try that again?"

Back on the sidelines, the dryad leaned over to Will. "So, that's your sister?"

"I'm afraid so," he said, grimacing. He had been hoping for quiet, for learning—so far, this was just as bad as Kylem.



"Looks like she's chosen her house."

It was true—Rowan was standing on the side of the Prismari students now, hurling sparks across at the others. Reluctantly, Will stepped onto the field, picking his way through the battle, dodging gouts of flame and arrows of light as they flew back and forth. When he finally managed to reach her, he grabbed her arm. "Rowan, this isn't our fight. Let's go."

She just laughed. "Will, you'd have some fun if you actually tried it!"

"We're not here to have fun, Rowan! We're here to become better mages!"

"Stand aside, first-year!" came a shout from behind him. He turned just in time to catch an orb of ink in the chest, which exploded and sent him crashing into Rowan. Together, they picked themselves off the ground, coughing, and Will looked down in horror: the copy of *Memoirs of Thadus* that he'd had in his traveler's pack had fallen out and was dripping with black ink. He knew at once that it was ruined. "Okay," Will growled, clenching his jaw. "Maybe it is our fight."

Rowan tugged him to his feet. "Remember the match against Vitrus and Gorm?"

Will nodded, calling up the energy to cast magic. Instantly the air around him dropped several degrees; he let out a breath, which fogged in the air. "Let's do it."

Rowan turned and lifted her hand, calling forth a sphere of lightning that popped and sizzled as it stretched and snaked into the air.

Will counted as he sent a wave of cold wind and ice to swirl around Rowan's lightning. "One… two . . . THREE!"

Will and Rowan moved as one, their magic combining as it arced toward the other students. They didn't seem to be grinning too smugly anymore—but just before it hit the Silverquills, Rowan's lightning flared and snapped, cutting through the ribbons of Will's ice magic. Will frowned, but it was too late to adjust. Rowan's attack was strong, at least; it pierced the shield of light the older Silverquill student had conjured, sending her stumbling backward.

Rowan whooped next to him, but the celebration was short-lived as she spun and used a lash of lightning to knock away another mage's barbs.

Will stared at the spot where their combined magic—the interweaving of spells they had always been able to do—had failed. Something wasn't right.

…

Liliana stood outside the Biblioplex, watching the bright parade of students as they passed. She could almost feel the weight of her old Witherbloom uniform and pulled absently at the collar of her professor's coat.



Across the way, Dean Nassari strutted through the Biblioplex doors, with Dean Lisette next to them. Liliana fell into step alongside the deans.

"Professor Onyx." Dean Lisette nodded in greeting. "How are you settling in with your classes?"

"Just fine," Liliana said. "Though I've been hearing some disturbing rumors from the students."

Dean Nassari laughed. It was an odd sound, from an efreet, like water streaming over crystals. "Well, young minds are wont to create elaborate tales. I think it's a good sign. Active imaginations, and all that."

Liliana forced a smile, trying to keep her tone light. "Unless they're also playing dress-up and skulking through the halls, I would say this is a little more than innocent play."

"Skulking?" Dean Lisette arched a brow. "And you've seen one of these people?"

She paused. How to answer this? "I saw a stranger in a mask on campus. Whether this was one of these Oriq, however . . ."

"That word again. It always sounds so serious. We really don't know if these rumors are more than a harmless prank," said Dean Lisette.

That magic the masked stranger had slung at her was far from a harmless prank. "We shouldn't underestimate them, in any case. The other

deans and professors should be warned. Surely the school has some line of defense that we can employ."

"You mean, other than Alibou?" Dean Nassari huffed. "I'm sure he would love to actually have something to do for a change. Maybe then he'll let go of his grudge against me."

"I was thinking something more than a single golem."

"Even if these whatever-you-call-them do present some risk—our students are hardly helpless lambs," said Lisette. "They can defend themselves."

"But who's going to protect them from each other?" said Nassari, gesturing at a nearby courtyard. Liliana could see errant spells sailing into the sky as cheering and shouting filled the air; another duel. Lisette sighed while Nassari laughed. "See? With such talent, I don't think they have anything to fear from the Oriq."

"Dean Nassari," started Liliana. "We should really—"

"Fine, fine."

Together, they moved to break up the battle. Nassari sent a wide swath of water through the crowd, corralling Prismari students. Vines and roots shot forth from the ground under Dean Lisette's command, pulling children away from each other and binding their hands before they could send any more magic flying.



A young boy grumbled as he followed a blond girl off the field. "This isn't Kylem, Rowan."

Liliana frowned, her gaze sweeping over their clothes. They were out of uniform, and swords hung from their belts. His short hair was just as bright as hers, their eyes and noses mirrors of each other.

Kylem, he'd said. She knew of a place called Kylem—but it wasn't located on Arcavios.

The girl frowned. "I know that, Will. But this isn't Eldraine, either. And you can't tell me what to do."

"Can we please just go? Before we get into trouble."

Liliana watched as the twins passed her, briefly meeting the boy's gaze. He shot her a nervous smile, then hurried past, pulling his sister along with him.

They probably weren't Oriq agents. But if they were Planeswalkers, then maybe they could be useful if—*when*, she corrected herself—trouble arrived at Strixhaven.

…

Will marveled at the walls inside of the student dormitories. Intricate lines raced along the stone, glowing with a soft light. He reached out and traced one of them, the magic tingling against his fingertip.

"This is it," Rowan said from down the hall. She waved Will over before pushing in the door.

Going in after her, Will took in the sturdy walls and the glass window. Sunlight streamed in, filling the space with a warm glow. Two beds stood on either side of the room, each neatly made with gray blankets covered in intersecting golden lines. On the wall behind the door, two uniforms hung on racks, matching shoes sitting on the floor beneath them.

Rowan dropped onto the bed closest to the door. "This is nice. Much better than those rocks they called beds on Kylem."

Will chuckled as he set his books down on the other bed. He sat down, sinking into the plush mattress, and ran his hands along the gleaming stitches. The same glowing lines flowed across the stone walls. Carved symbols nestled in at the corners, stone flames and trees and stars marching along the ceiling. His attention snagged on the flames, reminding him of the fierce duel outside. He looked down at his hands. "Did that spell we cast together seem . . . off to you?"

Rowan looked over from the other bed. "What do you mean?"



"I don't know. It just wasn't the same as on Kylem."

"Well, we're not on Kylem, remember?" Rowan shrugged and planted her feet on the blanket. "Besides, it worked, didn't it? What's the big deal?"

Will shook his head. "Yes, it worked, but . . . it should have been smoother. More cohesive. We've done spells together dozens of times, but this time it was as if our magic wasn't cooperating. I wonder if the Biblioplex will have some answers."

"Well, you have fun with all that reading," Rowan said. She pulled herself up and headed toward the door.

"This isn't just my problem, Rowan," protested Will. "What if being on this world is doing something to affect our magic?"

"My magic was just fine."

"No, it wasn't." Will stepped toward his sister. "But here, we can figure out why. You heard Kasmina—this is the most extensive collection of magical knowledge in the Multiverse! We didn't come here to get in some stupid school feud."

Rowan rolled her eyes. "Oh, really? And what did we come here for?"

"To learn. To get stronger. To take advantage of the knowledge and wisdom that Strixhaven has to offer." Will dropped his hands to his side. "We could take all of that back to Eldraine and help our own people."

Rowan only shook her head. “That’s what you came here for, Will. But I’m not you. We may be twins, but I’m allowed to live my own life.”

“Of course you are.” Will sighed. “That’s not what I meant.”

After a moment, Rowan turned and left. Will grabbed his books and hurried after her. But as Rowan moved further down the hall, Will’s steps slowed. Maybe he would have to find answers on his own.

...

On a bench along a scenic campus courtyard, Kasmina watched her owl returning from the dormitories. She could still see the twins in her mind, their images a bit warped from the shape of those avian eyes. Strixhaven would offer many possibilities for them both. She just needed to see which ones they would take.



*“Archway Commons”, by Piotr Dura.*



Something pulled at her attention, and Kasmina closed her eyes. But instead of darkness, her mind filled with red.

Another of her owls flew through the air, soaring over a rocky desert. Movement below snagged her gaze.

A man climbed the rocks, the reds and browns of his clothes helping him blend into the landscape. Beside him, a foxlike creature leapt nimbly up the side of the formation, only to suddenly stop and drop into a defensive stance.

There was a rush of air as several figures seemed to slide from the shadows, stepping out of the surrounding mesas at impossible angles. They were dressed in dark clothes, metal masks hovering where their faces should be. A sickly purple light coalesced in each of their raised hands—all of which were pointed at the man with the fox-thing. Slowly, he raised his hands in surrender.

Kasmina sent a mental command, and her owl followed high overhead as the mages bound the man’s arms and dragged him toward a yawning cave mouth waiting ahead.

...

Lukka grunted as the mages shoved him into the cave. Mila prowled at his side, her teeth bared and hackles raised. Silently, he reached out

through their link to soothe her. If she attacked, the mages would think he was an enemy. And while he was sure he'd win the fight, that wasn't what he had come here for. Mila looked up at him, then slowly settled back into wariness. She kept in step with Lukka, stepping over aged, moldering books that spilled over from the bare stacks along the wall.

The mages brought him into a larger chamber. Stalagmites and stalactites cut through the space like jagged teeth, the ceiling bathed in shadows. Lukka stumbled on a loose stone, sending a small shower of pebbles skittering down the slope behind him.

"Quiet," one of the masked mages hissed at him. He shoved at Lukka's shoulder. "Keep moving."

Lukka took a breath, trying to smother his own annoyance. Then one of the stalagmites moved.

At first, he thought he was imagining things, the darkness playing tricks with his mind. Then Lukka extended his senses and froze—the pebbly, ridged texture wasn't stone, but some kind of shell. Slowly, whatever it was seemed to unfold, stretching long and spindly legs into the darkness. Behind him, another stalactite shifted in place, making a low chittering sound as it did. They were surrounded.

"Keep. Moving," said the masked mage.



They picked their way through the space, every skittering stone sending their gazes up to the ceiling. Lukka tried to envision what the creatures looked like when they were active. The thought of facing one of them in the flesh brought back memories of the many crawling nightmares that lurked in the cave systems under Ikoria. Accompanying the horror, though, was an odd familiarity—he couldn't help but feel as though he had encountered their kind before.

The mages yanked Lukka to a stop, forcing him to his knees. Mila turned toward the far side of the cavern, dropping low with a snarl. Lukka glanced down at her. "Hey. Quiet."

The crunching of bones punched through the silence. Footsteps approached, and out of the shadows came a tall, thin figure. Swirling around the long, almost bird-like mask hiding his face were currents of dark, coruscating energy.

Lukka tried to keep his own expression neutral as the man approached one of the creatures hanging from the ceiling, pausing to caress its shell. "Welcome to Arcavios, Lukka of Ikoria."

"You know me?"

"I know many things. Things that I could teach you." The masked man stepped away from the strange creature, toward Lukka. "And in exchange, I believe there are things *you* could do for me."

# EPISODE II
## Lessons

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WE LEARN ABOUT LUKKA'S STRUGGLES
FROM WHEN HE FIRST ARRIVED ON ARCAVIOS.
LILIANA THE MYSTERIOUS PROFESSOR ONYX
SEARCHES FOR THE ULTIMATE FORM OF NECROMANCY.

---

Tavver didn't know how long he had waited in that cramped tunnel beneath the Biblioplex—hours, certainly, though it felt like far longer. He didn't feel safe moving during the day; eventually he'd have to emerge from the underground passage and cross the ravine separating the school from the surrounding woodlands. After that he'd be in tree-cover, mostly, but even that was no protection against being seen. This was a school full of *mages*—damn it all! The best mages in all of Arcavios, no matter what the other Oriq said about all the undeserving brats. And what if one of the Founders happened to fly overhead? He had no interest in being incinerated by dragonflame. No, Tavver always thought himself a pragmatist. So, very pragmatically, he waited until nightfall.

He wasn't excited about facing Extus again—not after failing his mission. But he would worry about that when he got out alive. Tavver had seen true darkness in that professor's violet eyes. She'd meant to kill him—and for what? So that Extus could have some dusty old book he remembered from however many years ago?

...

Finally, with night fallen, he could start the hard trek home through the forest and over the rocky bluffs. It would be a long night.

Three weeks earlier, before Lukka met the Oriq mages—before they'd kidnapped him, in fact—he squinted against the light, his stomach still churning from planeswalking. Never a pleasant sensation. Across the grassy field ahead of him was a small village. He could see a few people milling about; one woman was waving her hands over a row of tilled earth, muttering a growth spell, while another ordered what looked like a mud-construct to drag a plow through the field.

He wandered through unpaved streets until the smell of food drew him into an inn. Ignoring the stares and whispers of the people seated at the squat wooden tables, Lukka sat down at the wooden bar.

"Looking for something, stranger?" said the innkeeper, a round man with a head of robust curls.



"A hot meal," said Lukka. The innkeeper hesitated as though about to say something, then nodded and moved toward the kitchen.

"Haven't seen clothes like that before," came a voice behind Lukka. "You're not from around here, I imagine."

He turned. A tall man in the same rough clothing as the rest of the townsfolk had stood up from his table and was walking over.

"No," said Lukka, turning away. "Guess I'm not."

"You know who they say dress strange and act stranger? Coming through little towns like ours to recruit? The Oriq," said the man behind him. His tone was far from friendly.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Where are you from, then?"

Lukka kept his eyes straight ahead, not bothering to even look at the loudmouthed man. "You wouldn't know it."

He heard the man suck his teeth. The innkeeper still hadn't returned from the kitchen. Lukka was starting to doubt he ever would.

"Okay, Oriq, I think I've heard enough. We don't take kindly to meddlers in this town, or those who seek to disturb the peace. If we were a proper city, we'd get the closest, least-busy Dragonsguard to sort you

out. But we're just a small farming village—so we've learned to deal with strangers ourselves."

Lukka felt, rather than saw, the rush of magic as the man began a spell. *Is everyone a damn mage on this plane?* He turned and, in one fluid motion, smashed his fist into the man's jaw. The man dropped limply, the wispy energy curled around one hand dissipating. Lukka had an instant to breathe before another man crashed through the door of the inn, a ball of flame hovering above one outstretched hand. Lukka got a few steps away before the firebolt splashed against the back of his coat, knocking him through the glass of a nearby window and into the street.

The stink of charred leather filled his nose, mingling with the searing pain across his shoulders. Lukka snarled and cast his senses out, over the village, finding every vulnerable mind he could. He called to them, stumbling back to his feet.

The fireball-throwing man had left the inn and was joined outside by two other burly-looking townsfolk. "Where are your friends? We know you Oriq scum like to travel in packs."

"Oh, they'll be coming along any minute now," said Lukka.

The man lifted his hand and began to fill it once again with fire. Before he could finish, a dog leapt through the air, its sharp teeth flashing as they sank into his arm. The man screamed, the flames sputtering out as



he fought to free himself. He managed to tear his arm free just as a horse charged at him. He and his companion dove out of the way, but the horse followed them, spurred by Lukka's rage. It reared back, then brought its hooves down hard.

Lukka's smirk faded as hunger shot through his stomach. He staggered down the road, his mind absently following the fight through the beasts, until the noise faded behind him.

...

Usually, reflected Liliana, one did not willingly walk into a dragon's lair—or if one did, they did so with a death wish and some very keen blades. She had neither as she approached the tangled grove where Beledros Witherbloom made her home. All she brought with her were questions that needed answering.

She pushed aside a low-hanging bough, trying to make as much noise as possible. Sneaking up on a dragon was an even worse idea than visiting one. But the nest was empty, just a broad patch of foliage pressed flat into the earth, and Liliana felt relieved in spite of herself. *Nicol Bolas is gone. What am I really shrinking from?*

The lair was surrounded by dark-leaved trees leaning over the divot in the earth like jurors. The scent of decay mingled with fresh earth, but Liliana knew that Beledros had a formidable collection of arcane writings

tucked away. Glowing spheres of various sizes lay tucked into massive root structures, protecting their contents from the humid air. Maybe there was something in the books and scrolls that could help her bring Gideon back. Liliana peered into one of the globes, careful not to get stuck in the thick mud underfoot.

She was looking through her fifth sphere when the sound of wings brought her attention to the sky. Liliana took a deep breath and remembered to adjust her professor's uniform as the shadow of Beledros Witherbloom passed over her.



*"Beledros Witherbloom", by Raymond Swanland.*



Beledros circled the spot twice before landing with an earth-shaking tremor. She folded back her black feathered wings as she studied Liliana with those eerie, bright eyes. "Taiva may be harsh at times, but surely dealing with him is not as troublesome as trekking all the way out here, Professor."

"What I need isn't something the director can help me with."

Beledros gave what Liliana thought was curious look.

"I found some of your work on aetheric reincorporation." Liliana pulled a pointed piece of metal from her pocket. It was the only piece of Gideon she had, a tip from one of the blades of his sural. "What would it take for such methods to work on humans?"

Beledros made a rumbling noise, the sound vibrating the ground beneath her. "This smells of a dangerous sort of meddling to me. Some questions are better left unanswered."

"I didn't come here for a lecture. I just want a simple answer."

"When it comes to aether, there are no simple answers." Beledros walked past Liliana, making her way into a deeper recess in the side of the crater. She turned and laid down, wrapping her tail around her massive form. "You speak of the very essence of life. It cannot be ordered about like a pet. Resurrection—apart from baser necromancy, you understand—is fiendishly difficult, even for myself."

Liliana set her jaw. “And what about the child of Professor Gladefell?”

The dragon went still, each huge black eye a bottomless pit. “No. That was . . . something I will not see repeated. For all our sakes.”

“I am not some wayward student, Beledros.” Liliana stepped toward the dragon, Gideon’s blade cold in her hand. “I do not need your coddling, and I do not need your protection.”

“Perhaps not,” Beledros said. “But it is not you I would be protecting.”

“What do you care about humans, anyway? I imagine we seem little more than insects to you. None of the Founders have even been to the university in years.”

The dragon turned her head and closed her huge, heavy-lidded eyes. “The deans are more than capable of keeping order and peace. As are the Dragonsguards and the Oracle.” She let out a little chuckle, stirring the layer of decaying leaves and mulch underneath them. “Even the Archaics do their part.”

Liliana’s nails dug into her palm. The dragon had to know more than what she was letting on. And this was her last hope. Gideon’s last hope. “Please. He took my death. Help me give him back his life.”



Beledros cracked an eye open and looked at her for a moment. The wind blew over the top of the crater walls, stirring the dark trees surrounding the lair. Finally, she closed her eye again. “I cannot.”

A jolt of pain in Liliana’s hand told her she had gripped the piece of the sural a little too tightly. She stared down at her bleeding palm, trying to calm the storm of emotions inside her. This wasn’t a fight she could win with force or sheer will. Liliana tucked the blade piece back into her pocket and turned to leave. She was halfway up the crater when Beledros spoke.



*“Lukka, Wayward Bonder”, by Kieran Yanner.*

"The pain can be unbearable at times. But in the end, how we honor the dead is reflected in how we treat the living."

Liliana looked back, but the dragon was still curled up in the side of the crater, slowly drifting toward sleep.

...

Lukka stumbled as he moved across a stony ledge, minding his step along the edge of a sheer cliff. Far below, short grass and scrawny trees held on bitterly to life. His hunger had only gotten worse, tightening his stomach more and more with each shaky step. What little food he'd managed to hunt down was long gone, and he'd run out of water hours ago.

The ledge suddenly gave way beneath him, crumbling into loose stone. Lukka cried out as his ankle twisted. He threw out his hands, reaching for anything to save him from the long fall, and his fingers caught on the edge of a sharp, flat stone. Gritting his teeth, he pulled himself up the side of the cliff, legs scrambling for purchase, and finally threw himself back onto the stone shelf. He laid there for what felt like an eternity, his lungs burning as he sucked in gulps of air.

Thoughts of his near demise faded as his gaze caught on the rock that had saved him. It floated in the air, the end facing him smooth and curved. Lukka stood up, finding more of the odd rocks hovering around the side



of the cliff. Together, they formed a half-circle, as if the rest of them were lost within the cliff itself.

A small noise grabbed his attention Lukka tensed, ready for trouble—but, as it came again, it seemed a pitiful sound, soft and weak.

Lukka followed it until he found a pile of stones. He dropped to his knees, pushing one of the stones away. A pair of golden eyes looked back out at him. The creature gave a miserable yelp, blinking against the light. As Lukka shoved the rest of the stones aside, he saw that her gray fur was dirty, covering the spots that ran in a camouflage pattern along her back. A long gash ran across the creature's snout, and something had taken a chunk out of one of her pointed, black-tipped ears.

Free now, the foxlike creature limped past the stones Lukka had moved, putting more space between them. He sat down hard, the strength in his legs finally giving out. He felt faint. "Go on, then. Get."

The fox turned and darted around the curve of the cliff just as consciousness slipped away.

When he woke, the first thing he registered was her presence. He kept still, slowly opening one eye. She sat on her haunches a few paces away, staring at him. Then her eyes flicked to the ground beside him.

Lukka followed her gaze. A pile of berries and nuts lay beside his leg. "Thank you."

The fox tensed, rising to her feet.

Lukka started to raise a hand, but stopped himself. He stared at her, the silence stretching as the first sun began to rise in the distance. Finally, Lukka took a deep breath and cast out his bonder's senses.

The warm brush of fur caressed his mind as the link between them settled. It had been a while since he used this gentler magic—not for a servant, but a partner. He hadn't even realized how much he'd missed it.

...



*"Mila, Crafty Companion", by Kieran Yanner.*



Liliana pushed off the side of the towering metal torch and continued her trek back to Strixhaven empty-handed. She'd been gone for days by this point—days of classes that had gone untaught, meetings that had gone unattended, professorial duties that had gone undone. After Beledros's refusal to help her, she'd followed rumors of an Archaic to the ruins of Caerdoon. But she'd found no massive, mystical giant packed full of arcane secrets. In fact, she hadn't found much of anything. It had been for nothing—and now she would be questioned by the other professors. Or worse, by Deans Valentin and Lisette.

An animal screech sounded in the distance. The strangled cry came from somewhere up ahead, off the path, though Liliana couldn't see past the thick canopy of trees. She stepped into the undergrowth, keeping low.

In a clearing not far off the path, seven people stood in a circle. Purple magic flared around their outstretched hands, the same color as the light that wound in smoky trails around their masks. Liliana pressed against the gnarled trunk of an old tree and watched as the band of Oriq agents surrounded a large white stag.

The beast bleated and reared back, swiping at one of the agents with its hooves. One figure fell back, but the others pushed forward, forcing it toward the metal crate that lay open behind it. Inch by inch, the stag backed into the crate, its cries splitting the air—then sharply cut off as the door of the metal box slammed shut.

Liliana watched, silent and still, as they loaded the captured stag onto a wagon waiting nearby. Eventually, the creak of the wagon wheels faded into the distance.

...

In the distance, Lukka could make out the curling tail of smoke from a chimney somewhere beyond the woodland. In another world, another plane, he would have felt relief. Finally, somewhere soft to rest his head. Somewhere to get a decent meal where he wouldn't have to mind-control rabbits into letting him break their necks. But here, in Arcavios, he knew he'd just get treated with the same suspicion as he had been everywhere else. The people of this plane hated everything new, everything they didn't understand. Like those Oriq, the masked mages who used magic "forbidden by the colleges of Strixhaven," whatever that meant. Every villager seemed to think there was an Oriq agent hiding under their bed. In some ways it reminded him of home, of the way General Kudro had looked at him when Lukka had first shown his bonder magic. This was a place ruled by fear.

The sound of raised voices pulled Lukka from his thoughts. He followed them to the other side of a ridge. Down below, he could see a woman wearing immaculate robes facing a group of masked individuals. Purple, wispy smoke curled and danced across their covered features; all wore hoods, turning their silhouette alien and inhuman.



The woman didn't appear concerned to be outnumbered four to one. Stitched onto her robes, Lukka could make out the stylized form of a dragon. *Ah, the Dragonsguard I've heard so much about.* Elite mages that had studied at the beck and claw of those scaly old reptiles.

"This is your last chance," the woman was saying. "Turn yourself in and—"

The masked figures didn't wait for her to finish. One shot out a hand, a coil of dripping purple energy snapping out toward her. The Dragonsguard flicked her wrist effortlessly; there was a bright flash, and suddenly the coil of dark magic was flying—

Right for Lukka.

He ducked just in time, the spell hissing horribly as it flew overhead and hit a tree to his right. At once, the truck began to blacken as rot spread out from the point of impact. Bits of dead leaves rained down on the clearing, and the sound of cracking wood signaled imminent collapse. Lukka leapt out of the way just as the top of the tree split off and landed where he'd been standing.

*That could have killed me.* He couldn't decide who to be mad at—the one who'd cast the spell in the first place or the one who'd redirected it toward him. He settled on both.

Lukka cast his senses out into the forest, snagging on a bear claws-deep in a berry bush. Further: his senses grabbed the wolves dozing as

they waited for nightfall, and he jerked them to wakefulness. Further still, he felt the strange fervor of a creature that had already been creeping toward the clearing, drawn by the lure of . . . magic? Lukka frowned but kept his focus. Connecting with the nearby beasts, he summoned each and every one to the clearing.

The Oriq agents, meanwhile, spread out to surround the Dragonsguard. One of them threw a ball of crackling black flame toward her; with a gesture, she turned it to stone, and it dropped out of the air harmlessly. Another conjured what looked like a snake made of glittering, silvery liquid; with a spoken word, the Dragonsguard caused a massive clod of dirt and grass—shaped surprisingly like a mongoose—to rip its way free of the ground before pouncing on the arcane serpent. Even Lukka found himself impressed by how effortlessly she seemed to answer whatever spells they could throw at her.

Behind her, a wolf pounced from the tree line, teeth bared savagely. This one almost seemed to catch the woman by surprise—but before it could reach her throat, she sealed the beast in a greenish bubble. It floated off into the air, raging helplessly against its containment.

"So it's true," said the Dragonsguard, turning to look at him up on the ridge. "We had heard of an Oriq with your abilities."

"For the last time, I'm not a damn Oriq!" growled Lukka.



As if to drive home his point, the bear burst forth from the trees by the line of masked figures, sending them scrambling as it swiped wildly with those huge killing claws. One of them threw a hex over his shoulder as he fled, withering the animal's arm and causing it to roar in pain.

The sound was joined by a far less familiar sound. Lukka looked over to see the strange creature he had connected with burst forth from the treeline. It skittered across the clearing on six legs, disturbingly quick. Glowing tendrils waved from its head as if underwater. With single-minded focus, it made straight for the Dragonsguard.

This was a foe she seemed to take seriously. Lukka watched her set her feet and contort her hands in an arcane position. She spoke a word and roots as thick as his arm burst forth from the ground, wrapping around the chitinous legs of the creature. He heard the snapping of limbs as it was dragged down into the earth, screeching all the while, until the soil covered the insectile thing with an awful finality.

Lukka was so drawn in by the spectacle, he didn't notice the root creeping around his own ankle until it yanked him into the soil down to his waist. He pressed on either side of him, trying to lift himself free, but to no effect. The Dragonsguard sauntered over to him, clearly in no rush.

"Neat trick. But, at the end of the day, you're nothing but an untrained hedge-mage, like any other Oriq." She extended an open palm toward him.

Something blurred at the edge of Lukka's vision. A second later, the Dragonsguard screamed. There was a blooming of heat and a bright wash of flame and he turned away, shielding his face with one hand. When he looked back, a familiar shape stood over the Dragonsguard's still body, her fiery tail twitching as she sniffed at her fallen opponent. When she was satisfied, the foxlike creature turned and looked at Lukka, her big eyes oddly knowing.

Lukka held the beast's gaze for a moment before looking around the clearing. The Oriq agents were gone. If he hadn't been there, they wouldn't have lasted more than a minute. No discipline, no strategy. Just a bunch of scary costumes.

Lukka dragged himself to his feet and scanned the ground nearby. Obviously the Oriq agents had left a trail in their haste to get away; he easily spotted the signs the masked mages had left in their wake. *If everyone who doesn't play by the rules here is an Oriq, maybe I'm one of them after all.*

He was about to start following the trail when a soft yelp made him pause. Lukka turned to find the foxlike creature sitting in the clearing. She blinked and cocked her head to one side.

Lukka turned and shook his head, resigned. "Fine."

He closed his eyes and reached out with his mind. The fox's own mind seemed to leap to meet his, and the bond softly slipped back into place.



Lukka let himself relive the sense of relief and gratitude he'd felt when he'd seen her fly at the guard.

He opened his eyes to find the creature watching him, her tongue hanging over the side of her blood-stained maw. She trotted over to the Oriq's trail and sniffed at one of the tracks.

"Well. If you're going to stick around, then I'll need to call you something. How about Mila?" He felt the pleasant ring of recognition in her mind and nodded. "Alright, then. Mila it is."

…

Extus held his breath as he poured the shimmering red liquid into the shallow bowl. It swirled into the glowing potion, arcane light welling up in strange bubbles and casting strange shadows across the walls of the cave. The red lightened until it was nearly white—then violet shot through the mixture and the potion dimmed until it was nothing more than inert dark sludge. He smacked the bowl across the room and it shattered against the wall, leaving the failed potion smeared across the stone. *That was the fourth failure.*

Movement caught his eye, and Extus looked toward the entrance to the cave. One of his Oriq agents stood there, the dark magic flaring around their mask an unpleasant reminder.

"Why are you just standing there? Bring me more cervidar essence!"

The agent jumped as if physically struck and backed away from the cave, disappearing into the tunnel that led to the main cavern.

Alone, Extus slumped over his worktable. He looked over the books spread open before him. None of them had been any use. None of them showed him how to attain the power he needed. His gaze wandered over the side of the table to the floor, where the other ritual components lay still. The mage hunter's legs were still pinned down, held in the grip of the Oriq agents who now lay dead around it. All valuable tools, sacrificed for nothing—every last bit of life drained from their bodies, and it wasn't enough.

Someone entered the chamber behind him, and Extus straightened. "Are the rest of my supplies here?"

"There has been a delay. They ran into a Dragonsguard," said the agent.

Behind his mask, Extus gritted his teeth together. He reserved a special hatred for the Dragonsguard. Of all the meddlers who stood in his way, they were by far the worst. So arrogant, so self-assured. He was eager to show them just how misplaced all that confidence was—the Dragonsguard, and all the rest of Strixhaven's elite with them.

Not a day went by where he didn't think about that place. He could still remember walking through the Hall of Oracles. He could still see the space where his statue should have been. Just to the left of . . .



The Snarl.

Extus looked at the sludge, now dried on the wall. If more power was what he needed, that overlapping tangle of power hidden away below the school would offer more than enough, though reaching it was no easy feat. That nexus of ancient energies wasn't some dusty book sitting on a shelf in the Biblioplex; it would be guarded by the most formidable forces Strixhaven could muster. Constructs, elementals, professors—Dragonsguard.

"There was someone else there," said the agent, drawing Extus from his thoughts. "Someone interfering."

She told him about the man who seemed able to call beasts of the forest to do his bidding. By the time she finished, Extus was more than intrigued.

"They say that he's following them now," the agent said. "Should I tell them to get rid of him?"

"No." Extus cleared his throat. He glanced at the bodies next to his table, then lifted his gaze toward the shadows overhead. The torchlight shone on the hard exoskeletons of the dormant mage hunters as they hung from the rocky ceiling. "Let him come."

Behind his mask, Extus smiled.

...

Liliana set down the tome she had been studying and rubbed her eyes. Another day of fruitless research. She had done all that she could think of, and none of it would work. There wasn't a book or scroll or spell in Strixhaven that could bring Gideon back. Besides, with the Oriq on the move, there were more pressing matters at hand. Nobody else seemed to be taking them seriously.

She glanced out the window behind her desk. In the distance, the suns had begun their slow descent toward the horizon. Light glinted off the floating stones of the Dawnbow. Liliana stared at the star arch, her gaze tracing its curve down toward the buildings of the main campus.



*"Confront the Past", by Kieran Yanner.*



She'd come here to find a way to bring Gideon back. Nothing more and nothing less. But if she hadn't been here, she wouldn't have seen that Oriq agent in the Biblioplex. Liliana hated the idea of destiny. She'd always thought of it as someone else telling her what to do; just another heartless master. Gideon, however, had been a great believer in being in the right place at the right time. Maybe it was time she learned a lesson from him. *Not too late, I hope.*

There was only so much she could do alone, though. Even if the mage students spent their free time blasting each other across the campus, they weren't prepared for what was coming. She needed help. She needed power.

A flash of gold outside her window caught her eye. Liliana leaned forward.

A group of young students ambled past her office. One of them stood out, her blond hair shining in the dim light as it fell over the shoulders of her Prismari uniform. Rowan Kenrith held her Witherbloom friends' attention as she gestured wildly, her sword bouncing against her leg as she led the group further down the walkway and out of sight.

Liliana sat back in her seat. *Maybe it's time to take my role as a* Professor *a little more seriously.*

# EPISODE III
# Extracurriculars

ROWAN AND WILL'S DIFFERENT PRIORITIES
CREATE A RIFT BETWEEN THE TWINS,
WHICH COMES TO A HEAD
DURING THE BIG MAGE TOWER GAME.



*"Explosive Welcome", by Mathias Kollros.*

Looking out the window over his desk, Will could see the winds of autumn stirring fallen leaves across the courtyard. Students in the blue and red of Prismari passed by, laughing and chatting, sipping on hot drinks. When his eyes finally drifted back to the *Ethics of Aetheric Manipulation* assignment, the questions had yet to complete themselves. He sighed and picked up his pencil again, just as the door to his dorm room creaked open. Rowan came in, her hair windblown and disordered, smiling about who-knew-what.

"Hey," said Will, already annoyed.

"Oh! Hey."

"Where have you been?"

"With Auvernine and Plink," Rowan responded, her smile departing.

"Your Witherbloom friends?"

"That's right." She crossed the room to their closet and dug through it. They shared that closet, of course, but Rowan's half was little better than a bird's nest of assorted garments.

Will stood up from his desk. "Already finished your *Ethics of Aetheric Manipulation* assignment?"

"Yep," said Rowan, tossing out bits and pieces of her winter uniform.



"And you're ready for the end of the week? They say Professor Onyx's exams are notoriously difficult."

Rowan fiddled with a buckle. "Her what?"

"The exam. You know, the one that's in two days?"

"Oh. Right."

Will threw his hands up. "Rowan, you're not taking any of this seriously! It's a privilege for us to be here. Don't you get that?"

She whirled on him, anger clear in her eyes. "Oh, you think I'm just too dumb to understand the *grand significance* of all this, is that it?"

"Rowan, I didn't say—"

"I think there are plenty of lecturers at Strixhaven without you joining them!"

It wasn't the words or the sudden, surprising anger that made Will step back—it was the coils of electricity jumping between loose strands of hair on his sister's face.

"Rowan," was all he could manage.

He watched her cycle past anger, to confusion, then embarrassment. She scrunched up her features and the sparks faded into nothing.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said bitterly. Before he could say another word, she grabbed the cloak of her winter uniform and stormed out the door.

...

Two days later, he was no closer to completing Professor Onyx's assignment, despite moving from his room to one of the communal study areas of the Biblioplex. Will slumped down in his chair, kneading his palms into his eyes. "If someone would just turn me into a newt or something it would probably save us all a lot of trouble."

Across the table, Quint looked up from his own reading, his hands folded around a cup of tea, his long snout sniffing with delight at the rising steam. "Is it about the aetheric tether?"

Will nodded weakly. "I hate aether. I hate tethers. I hate the whole idea."

"Tricky concept," agreed Quint. "Have you tried consulting Il-Samar's—"

Will only raised the book he was reading so his friend could see the title.

"—*Treatise on Corporeal Manipulation.* Hm."

"Thanks for trying," said Will.

"Well, I'm sure something will come to you," said Quint cheerily.

For a while, the only sound between them was the flipping of pages and the occasional sipping of tea. "Oh my," Quint said, after some time



had passed. "This is—wait, I've seen this before." He grabbed another book, flipping until he found the page he wanted, and traced a line of text, comparing the two tomes in front of him. "I knew it! Arthelas the Magnificent and Bairod Horizon-Seeker were the *same person*."

Will nodded absently, still stuck on Professor Onyx's unsolvable riddle.

Quint let out a breathless laugh. "There's just no mistaking this arcane sigil! This is astounding—it means the histories of the Kingdoms Below have to be rewritten from scratch, or at the very least re-ordered to account for—oops!"

Will jumped as Quint's tea sloshed from his cup and landed on the books in front of him, splashing across the ancient vellum. His eyes went wide. "What are we going to—? Isabough will have us in Detention Bog for a month!"

"Not if she doesn't see it." Quint set down his teacup next to the stained pages.

"You can't lift it," Will said. "It'll take the ink with it."

"True, but if I call like to like . . ." Quint's finger began to glow. He dipped it in his teacup, then touched it to the book. The spilled tea began to rise, small droplets floating from the page to fall back into Quint's cup. He looked up with a grin. "It's one of the spells we use to help us find scattered pieces during our digs."

Quint took another sip of his collected tea as Will chuckled and ran a hand over the pages, finding them smooth and dry to the touch. "Impressive."

Quint only shrugged. "There's always a spell."

...

Rowan looked around the Bow's End from the table she shared with Auvernine and Plink. She had been meeting the Witherbloom witches there after classes for a week now, and it was quickly becoming one of her favorite places on the campus. She took a sip of the fizzing potion, pleased with the sharp fruity taste.

"Did you hear about the duel yesterday? Dinsley's exam construct was destroyed," Plink said around a bite of food. "That Silverquill mage might as well have just set him on fire. Would have hurt less."

"Not if she did it right," said Rowan, grinning.

"I don't understand why they can't just wait until the Mage Tower match. Prismari, Silverquill—they can blast each other as much as they want, then. All these duels are just pointless posturing," said Auvernine.

The other girls laughed and agreed, but Rowan's smile slipped. A duel sounded like just the thing to blow off some steam. Ever since the deans had broken up the duel she and Will had stumbled into on their first day



at Strixhaven, she'd been itching for another chance to let loose. That had been the only worthwhile part of coming here so far—well, that and her friends from Witherbloom. Will, of course, seemed to be having the time of his life.

As if she'd summoned him herself, Will walked through the door. He scanned the room until he met her gaze, then made a beeline for the table. Rowan sighed and slumped over her potion. "Oh, great."

"What?" Plink looked up just as Will made it to the table. "Oh, it's your brother! Hello, Will."

Will nodded to her before turning to Rowan. "Professor Onyx posted the exam scores."

Rowan shrugged. "And?"

"You barely passed, Rowan," Will said, his voice hard. "I thought you said you didn't need any help."

"I passed, didn't I?" Rowan shook her head. "Not that it's any of your business."

"We had weeks to prepare." Will frowned. "You should know this stuff by now. And I could have helped you with the rest, if you hadn't been so busy running around with your friends. Do they even know about how your powers—"

"Outside. Now," said Rowan, interrupting him.

Will shot a glance at the Witherbloom witches, then turned on his heels and stalked toward the door. When she caught up with him, Rowan grabbed her brother's arm. "Where do you get off embarrassing me like that?"

"So they don't know about your magic sparking up any time you get angry." Will shook his head. "Rowan, we're here to learn *better* control of our powers, not to get worse! And we're definitely not here to just have fun. We're Kenriths! That still means something here."

"Actually, Will, it doesn't," said Rowan. "Nobody here's even *heard* of Eldraine. I'm not here to represent anybody or anything but myself!"

Will scoffed. "And you say you don't want to be like our birth mother."

Rowan's eyes turned flinty, hard. "What did you say?"

Will could feel the hair on his arms stand up as an electric charge coursed through the air around him. "Calm down," he said carefully. "I didn't mean—"

Rowan took a step toward her brother. "No, Will. Say it again. Tell me how I'm like our mother."

The door of the Bow's End opened and Auvernine and Plink rushed toward them with wide grins. "We figured out the conversion! We're going to Widdershins to get supplies."



Rowan glanced at them and plastered a friendly smile on her face. "Wait up. I'll come with you."

The Witherbloom witches nodded and fell into a frantic exchange as they headed off. When they were out of earshot, Rowan turned back to Will, the smile gone. "Leave me alone, Will. You can't tell me what to do."

Will grimaced. "I—"

But before he could finish, Rowan pushed past him and went to catch up with her friends.

...

Despite sharing a room, he barely saw Rowan after that. Every day, by the time Will woke, his sister would already be gone, out to do whatever it was she did besides study. By the time the much-anticipated Mage Tower match between the Prismari and Silverquill teams came along, he hadn't spoken to her in weeks. As the players rushed across the field, whipping the elements into one another's paths, Will found himself wondering how she was doing.

Next to him, Quint gasped and jumped up in his seat. "Unreal! Wickel's using the fourth earth-concept out there, in the middle of all that chaos! He's making it look *easy!*"

Will watched along with Quint as the Prismari player shifted great mounds of dirt and grass in circular formations, shoving them in the way of opponents and intercepting spells. Downfield, a Silverquill player suddenly turned and leapt into the air, an arc of black flame propelling her upward as she caught the floating mascot for her team, a blob-like, shape-shifting Inkling. Cheers erupted in the stands around them. Will turned to Quint. "What about that one?"

Quint frowned. "I'm not sure. Maybe a variation on Arnault's Combustion?"

Across the field, another wave of Silverquill spells sent the crowd into a frenzy. Memories of the duel they had witnessed on their first day floated through Will's mind, with thoughts of Rowan inevitably trailing behind them. He'd heard that she'd gotten into a few duels around campus since their fight at Bow's End.

Suddenly, Quint grew tense next to him, leaning forward in his seat.

"No . . ." Quint sat up even straighter, his eyes glued to the field. "No way is that going to work."

Will followed his gaze to where a Prismari player barreled toward the opposite team—charging right at the player holding the mascot.

All of the crowd watched as the Prismari player threw out a hand wreathed in a circle of crimson light. The Inkling began to glow, a halo of





*"Team Pennant", by Anna Febr.*

red light appearing over its shifting black head. Suddenly, it leaned over and sunk two long, liquid fangs into the Silverquill player's hand.

*"Ow!"* she yelped, dropping the Inkling—just in time for the Prismari player to scoop it up.

The entire arena exploded in cheers.

"Mascot interception! Brilliant!" Quint grabbed Will and wrapped him in a hug as they both cheered with the rest of the crowd.

"So he hypnotized it?" said Will, delighted but confused.

"He took control of it altogether. It's a simple trick, you understand, only works on summoned creatures—but wow!"

Will turned, looking at the students and professors and even some villagers in the stands. He took in their excitement, a smile crossing his face—but it wilted as he spotted Rowan across the aisle, staring directly at him.

...

"Let's get out of here," said Rowan.

"But the game isn't ov—" Plink grunted as Auvernine elbowed her into silence. She nodded toward the other side of the aisle and Plink followed her gaze. "Oh."

"You should at least say hello," said Auvernine.

"Oh, should I?"

Plink patted her arm. "He's your brother. That's not something to take for granted."

Rowan scowled, but her resolve crumbled under the attention of both her friends. "Fine."



She sidled past the others seated in her row and stepped into the aisle. A moment later, Will met her there. They both stood there for a moment, awkward, unsure what to say.

"So," said Will. "How are things?"

"You know," said Rowan. "Fine."

"Still hanging out with your Witherbloom friends?" said Will, gesturing behind her.

Rowan's lip stiffened. "That's not a problem, is it?"

"No. Maybe you just chose the wrong college, is all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you clearly have no interest in really learning. And they're nature mages—it's not like they'd care that you can't control your powers."

"I can control them," said Rowan, scowling now. "See me, right now, not blasting you with lightning?"

"Oh, so you didn't brawl enough around campus these last few weeks? Then what exactly have you been doing, because I know 'studying' hasn't made the list!" Will knew better than to needle her like this, but he couldn't help himself—he was angry at her for shutting him out, for leaving him on his own these last few weeks. "If all you wanted to do was fight, I wish you had just stayed on Kylem!"

He didn't mean it, but that didn't matter. He saw, from the strands of hair that began to stand up on Rowan's head, twitching and crackling with energy, that he had gone too far. "Oh, I'll show you what I've been learning."

Will felt the spark jump from her outstretched hand and pass through his whole body in an instant. His muscles jerked and seized and he pitched over sideways, collapsing.

"You wish I'd stayed on Kylem? Well . . . I wish you'd stayed *dead!*" yelled Rowan.

"Hey!" he heard Quint shout, somewhere behind him.

Will could barely move his arms—but he could reach out with his other senses. Rowan gasped as a rime of frost suddenly solidified around her boots, freezing her feet in place.

He muttered under his breath, fog puffing around his face. Rowan extended another hand, crackling with energy, but before she could discharge it, a layer of ice condensed around her fist. She cried out from the sudden cold and pain.

"Stop!"

In an instant, the crowd went silent. Rowan glanced toward the students around them, only to see Auvernine and Plink back away. More students moved, clearing a path as a shadow fell over Will. He squinted as he looked up, meeting Professor Onyx's gaze.



"All of you will return to your seats," she said in a commanding voice. "You two, however, are to come with me."

...

Will and Rowan followed Professor Onyx through the dark halls of one of the Witherbloom buildings. The shadows here were too deep to make out details, but something organic grew from the joined stone of the hallway, and a scent somewhere between floral and rot surrounded them on all sides.

By all accounts, you didn't want to end up on the wrong side of Professor Onyx. All sorts of horror stories about her passed through the Prismari dorms, and while Will didn't think it was *likely* that they'd end up incubators for some carnivorous undead fungus, he wasn't ready to completely rule it out. Worse, what if they got kicked out?

They followed her into her office. With a gesture, Professor Onyx ignited a few candles, which burned with purple flame. "What was all of that about?"

"Nothing," Rowan said, taking a casual tone. "Just two siblings blowing off steam."



*"Professor's Warning", by Kieran Yanner.*

"Last I checked, tossing around bolts of lightning is more than ordinary sibling rivalry," said the professor. She glared at Rowan. "Strife between brother and sister is a special kind of pain. And it takes a special kind of fool to foment it."

Will saw Rowan bristle at the insult. He cleared his throat. "It's my fault. I started the fight."

He felt Rowan's eyes on him, but kept his gaze forward.

Professor Onyx looked between them, then shook her head. She sat down in her chair. For a moment, Will could have sworn she looked very



tired. "There are those who wish this place—and all who call it home—great harm. If we're fighting amongst ourselves, they'll find that task far easier."

"Professor," said Will. "Who exactly are you talking about?"

She regarded him for a moment, holding him with those violet eyes. "Have you heard of the Oriq?"

"Losers who couldn't pass the entrance exam," said Rowan, before Will could answer. "Or who flunked out. Right?"

Professor Onyx chuckled, but it sounded far from happy to Will. "That's one way to put it. But underestimating them would be foolish. For all we might think otherwise, Strixhaven doesn't have a monopoly on power in this plane."

That made Will sit straight up in his seat. *This plane? Then Professor Onyx is . . .*

But all she did was smile.

Rowan must have missed it. She was still chewing over the comment about the Oriq. "But if they were actually planning some sort of attack, the professors would do something about it. Wouldn't they?"

"Maybe," said Professor Onyx. "And maybe not. The question to consider is: what would *you* do about it?"

...

The fresh air hit Will's lungs, cold and clear, as he followed Rowan out of the Witherbloom building. His sister was already halfway down the path, headed for the cafe. "Later."

"What? Didn't you hear what the professor just said? We have to do something!"

"Like what?" Rowan asked, turning back. "It's their school. Let them deal with it."

Will shook his head. "What if that's not enough? There are only so many professors here, Rowan. And we can't rely on them to be able to defend us all. There has to be a way that we can protect ourselves—protect the other students."

"For the last time, Will, this isn't Eldraine. We're not royalty here. We can't just," she waved her hands, "order problems away!"

"Being royalty didn't stop us from nearly being killed back home, either." Will shook his head. "At least here we have the Biblioplex. All that knowledge—there has to be something that will help us. I don't want to be helpless again."

Will didn't miss the shudder that went over Rowan. She squared her shoulders and clenched her jaw. She must have been remembering Oko and their father. Even now, it wasn't something that either of them could completely forget.



Rowan looked back at him, over her shoulder. "You dig through all the old books you want, Will. I'll prepare my own way for whatever's coming."

Will sighed as Rowan turned on her heels and left. *On my own, then. Again.*

Kasmina sat still among the trees outside campus as her owl showed her a small courtyard just outside the Biblioplex. Below, she could see the Kenrith girl sending forked lightning across the lawn. Nearby, two Witherbloom students watched. One applauded; the other said something she couldn't make out.

The vision of the courtyard blurred at the edges, fading into a vastly different landscape. Kasmina switched her focus to a different owl. The twins disappeared as shadows and red stone filled her vision instead.

She watched as Lukka stood with a masked Oriq agent. The agent shifted, pulling something from beneath their cloak and holding it out to the Planeswalker. Kasmina's owl turned its head to get a better view.

It was a silver mask, shaped like a human skull.

Lukka shook his head. His face shifted, his skin darkening and his ears stretching to points as he took on the markings of his fox companion. He watched the Oriq agent leave—then, suddenly, turned to stare right at the owl, causing Kasmina to lean back on reflex.

She sent a mental command to the bird, and it took flight, soaring up and out of the Oriq caves. She'd seen more than enough.

...

Rowan sat in Auvernine's room, watching absently as the girl poured and stirred a glowing potion at her desk. She was exhausted; she'd been training for weeks, working out the best ways to channel the power that seemed to be flowing through her day and night now. For all that, though, she'd made little progress.

A high screech pulled Rowan from her thoughts. She frowned as Auvernine lifted a squirming worm-like creature from a glass jar. "What is that?"

Auvernine's focus stayed on the creature as she placed it in a metal dish. "Common saltgobbler. Took me an hour to find one this big."

"What are you . . ." Rowan's words died as Auvernine began to chant, her hands held over the pest.

The creature went still, its bunches of beady black eyes wide. As Auvernine's voice filled the room, the worm began to rise from the plate, twisting and shivering as glimmering energy rose from its plump body.

Rowan's hand went to her mouth as she watched the creature's life force flow through the air and into her friend's potion. The liquid flared and bubbled, the color fading from a deep purple to a vibrant red. As Auvernine finished the spell, the saltgobbler flopped onto the dish, its body heaving as it struggled to breathe. Rowan grimaced. "That is just creepy."



"A little," Auvernine said with a nod. She picked up her potion and inspected it. "The potion requires more power than I can get from pure herbology. But if I can get it right, this could help a lot of people. Some sacrifices are necessary for the greater good, don't you think?"

Rowan only shrugged, her gaze falling back to the pest. Unpleasant memories of her mother welled to the surface; she willed them right back down. *Sacrifices. Right.*

...

Rowan found Will in the Biblioplex, surrounded by a pile of tomes and scrolls. Will reached for another book, flipping through its pages as he mumbled under his breath.

"This isn't exactly what I'd call training."

He looked up at her, clearly surprised. After a moment, his attention dropped back to the texts in front of him. "If the Oriq are as dangerous as people say they are, then the spells we know may not be enough," Will said, shaking his head. "We should focus on adding more to our arsenal."

"Or we could find a way to put more power behind what we already have."

But Will only turned another page, his eyes scanning the text.

Ignoring his dismissal, Rowan looked around. Across the room, next to a diligently studying Prismari student, floated a jellyfish-looking creature—an elemental, a construct of enchanted water shot through with glowing veins of pure arcane energy. Rowan swallowed some of the disgust she'd felt at what Auvernine had done. *It's just a spell, like any other.*

"Rowan, what are you doing?" Will asked, finally looking up from his books.

She shushed him; her focus narrowed to the elemental. Electricity crackled and leapt across her fingers as she pulled the veins of power out of its watery surface, toward her. It collapsed, finally, into a puddle on the stone floor. The energy gathered in her palm, sparking and roiling, before suddenly exploding in a burst of lightning that stood her hair on end. The Prismari student nearly fell out of his chair, scooping up his books and glaring back at Rowan as he fled.

"Rowan!" hissed Will. "You can't just—pull the magic out of whatever you feel like! Besides, we haven't taken any classes on siphoning theory! You'll hurt yourself, or somebody else."

"Will, the Oriq aren't worried about following syllabi, and they aren't going to follow campus guidelines," said Rowan. For the first time in what felt like forever, she was speaking calmly and evenly. "They're going to do whatever it takes. That means we've got to do the same."



"Having these powers is a responsibility, Rowan. That's part of what being here is all about. Otherwise we might use them for—" Will struggled to put his fears into words. "For selfish purposes. For dark ones. Didn't you learn anything from our mother, or from Oko?"

"Yeah," she shot back. "I learned that when you're not afraid to break the rules, you can get a whole lot done. Good luck with your books." She left him there. When a Lorehold librarian came by a few minutes later to ask about the lightning bolt that had briefly illuminated the stacks, Will didn't have much of an answer.

…

Kasmina felt her owl land on the top of her staff, but her gaze was fixed on the horizon. A figure appeared at the edge of the courtyard, silhouetted by the light of the setting suns. She recognized the set to his shoulders—the rigid, military way he carried himself. She recognized the fox that stood at his feet, too. "It's a shame to see a man like you fallen so far. What would your unit think of their former leader becoming a pawn in someone else's scheme?"

"They wouldn't think much of it, I imagine," said Lukka. "Considering half are in the ground and the other half want me dead. Just how long have you and your fake birds been watching me?"

"Long enough to know that this path will only lead to more pain," Kasmina said. "For you and many others. I'm not going to let you do that, Lukka." Her voice, in that moment, was neither wise nor benevolent—it was icy cold.

"I'm done being told how to live," he growled. "And I'm nobody's pawn. The mages who run this school think they're better than anyone else—and the whole damn world just nods and goes along with it. I'm going to show them they're wrong."

"I had hoped you might yet become an ally. That you could use those gifts of yours for the common good." Kasmina sighed. "But I see I have overestimated you."

Before Lukka could respond, Kasmina's owl shot off her shoulder, launching itself into the air. With a flap of its wings, the air around Lukka's fox suddenly condensed into a raging sphere. As the wind spun and swirled around the animal, Kasmina sent a scythe of pressurized air straight at Lukka's chest.

He narrowly ducked under the invisible blade and it passed straight past him, slicing through a stand of trees. Lukka glanced at Mila, his face growing sharper and leaner as he tried to connect with her, but the animalistic features faded almost as soon as they surfaced.



With a slash of her arm, Kasmina sent another blast of wind toward him, this one narrow and pointed like a lance. Lukka rolled to one side, then came up unsheathing his blade.

He charged Kasmina with bestial speed. She brought up her staff just in time to catch the sword on the wooden shaft. Her eyes lit up silver, but before she could unleash another spell Lukka spun away, snatching his blade free and sending her stumbling forward.

"These dragons," Lukka said, his voice a growl. "Those Dragonsguard. They've held power over these people for too long. They've made them fearful of every shadow, every unfamiliar face. What happens when it's not just the Oriq they're hunting down—when it's anyone who practices magic in a way they don't like?"

Kasmina turned and threw out her hand as Lukka swung again. A wall of blue light went up between them, curving around her. "You can't see beyond your own pain, Lukka. Do you think Extus is going to change all that? Do you think he's going to share power with you? He only fights for himself."

Lukka slammed his weapon against the wall of light, his face contorted with rage. "Frankly? I don't give a damn what he does after all this is burned to the ground."



*"Test of Talents", by Lie Setiawan.*

She took a step forward, her shield forcing Lukka back. He swung his blade again and again, trying to force his way through with brute strength, until Kasmina flicked her hand. The light shifted, beams of it shooting out and catching Lukka in the stomach. He flew back and landed next to his trapped fox. Before he could get up, Kasmina was there, the point of her staff held just under his chin.



"Yield," she said. "It's over."

Lukka's snarl burst into a savage laugh. "Over? Oh, no—it's only beginning."

Kasmina paused. In the rush of combat, she'd stopped keeping track of her owls. What she saw now, what had crept up to the very outskirts of the school, sent cold shocks through her.

"I didn't come here to beat you," said Lukka, grinning. "I'm not dumb enough to believe I could do that yet. But they sure can."

The ground trembled beneath them. The horizon began to crawl and shift with movement as a swarm of chitinous, chittering forms scurried between the trees. From their segmented bodies rose a sickly purple glow—it was as if the whole forest burned with unnatural fire.

"Mage hunters," whispered Kasmina. "What have you done?"

"Done? I told you," Lukka turned his head and spat blood from his mouth. He smiled, baring his stained teeth. "We're just getting started."

The mage hunters' glow was even brighter now as they closed in. Kasmina closed her eyes and concentrated on another plane, another place; a cloud of white feathers whipped over her, and she was gone.

...

Lukka got to his feet and dusted himself off. Light footsteps approached, and soon Extus stood next to him.

"Are you sure you're in control?" asked the Oriq leader. "No Oriq has ever tried to control this many at once."

Lukka nodded. "I'm not like your other mages."

There was movement behind him: the rest of the Oriq, coming to a stop at the edge of the courtyard. The agents stood ready, waiting for Extus's command.

Extus squared his shoulders and nodded. "Commence the attack."

# EPISODE IV
# Put To The Test

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THE ORIQ ATTACK STRIXHAVEN
WITH AN ARMY OF POWERFUL MAGE HUNTERS.
CAN LILIANA, ROWAN, AND WILL FIGHT THEM OFF?

---

Will started awake. It took him a moment to realize that he was in his room, that the shadowy figures lurking in the corners were remnants of whatever dream he had risen from. He was still in his uniform, now rumpled. His latest assignment, on the desk in front of him, remained unfinished. Outside he could see the Arcavios night, a slash of darkness punctuated by the usual odd glows across the campus. There was no sign of Rowan. Her side of the room was still in the same state of disarray it had been in for weeks. He stood up, wincing at a crick in his neck, just as a shout came from the hallway.

"—outhern gate!"

"How many did she—?"

"Is everyone—"

In the crowd of students rushing past, Will spotted someone from the Prismari Mage Tower team—Arlo Wickel, the pointguard who had impressed Quint with his earth magic.

"Hey! What's going on?"

Wickel pointed down the hall. "Hey first-year! Follow the crowd—Dean Uvilda is waiting to take you to a designated shelter."

"But what's *happening*?"

"The Oriq are here," he said curtly, before turning and running after the crowd of younger students. Will stood there for a moment, stunned, a sick feeling growing in his stomach. Professor Onyx had been right.

Outside, Will stumbled into a scene of utter chaos. The crowd, joined by more and more students flowing out of the dorms, had frozen by one end of the courtyard. On the other side, past their horrified, stunned expressions, Will could see an encroaching wall of dark shapes.

No—not shapes. Creatures.

They skittered across the manicured lawn on pointed, narrow legs, insectile plating covering wine-purple flesh. Violet, glowing spines ran along their backs and up to eyeless heads, featureless altogether save for a gaping, toothy maw. Terrible screeches rent the air.





*"Mage Hunters' Onslaught", by Lie Setiawan.*

They sounded hungry.

At first, Will only thought his knees were going weak—but the whole ground was shaking. He saw Wickel step out of the crowd, his entire body vibrating with energy, and thrust both hands into the loam beneath him. A semicircle of churning soil rippled out from where he stood, rising up into a wall of dense earth between the creatures and the students. He turned back to the wide-eyed first-years. "Run! I said *run!*"

Even as he hurried to comply, Will could see the first of the horrible creatures coming over the earthen wall, scaling it effortlessly. He needed to find his sister. Where was Rowan?

…

Across the campus of Strixhaven, Rowan howled and swung her sword. It bit into a joint between the creature's armor plating, sending a gout of dark blood spurting across her uniform and down onto the overgrown garden surrounding the Witherbloom dormitories. Behind her, Plink was backing away from one of the things, squealing in fear; with a shouted incantation, Auvernine called thorny roots up from the soil to wrap around the creature's legs and drag it down into the earth.

"They're everywhere!" shouted Plink, almost stumbling over the creature's buried form. "We're surrounded! Abandon ship! Surrender!"

Rowan scanned the field that stretched before Witherbloom college. Her friend was right. The creatures were advancing in an eerily glowing wall of chitin, pushing the students back toward the dorms.

"If we just wait for the professors—" started Auvernine.

"No. If we just wait, we're going to be overwhelmed. We have to get past them. We have to get out," said Rowan.

"And go where?" asked Auvernine desperately.



Rowan glanced toward the Biblioplex, her thoughts turning to Will. If she knew her brother, that's where he would be. "There," she said, pointing to its vast silhouette in the night.

"Oh, *now* you want to study?" said Plink, stumbling toward her friends, near-hysterical.

It wasn't just Will that drew her there, though. It was in the center of the campus; if the deans and professors would choose anywhere to make a stand, it would be there—and her brother had never stopped going on about all the powerful spells tucked away in those dusty old tomes. *Let's hope you're right, Will.*

…

"Professor Onyx, watch out!"

Liliana spun around at her student's shout just as an Oriq agent sent a hissing coil of energy at her. It was a vicious spell, something meant to suck the life from her—but she was quite experienced in magic such as this. She stopped the spell inches from her outstretched palm and regarded it coolly. Behind her, the crowd of students that had been in her lecture hall moments ago stared, agape and terrified. *He could have hit them,* she thought. *Well. Fair is fair.* With a gesture, Liliana sent it racing back toward the caster, twice as hungry as before. He tried to flinch away, but the ravenous magic devoured him before he had a chance to even scream.

Deans Kianne and Imbraham came to join her, jogging down the path that led to Quandrix College behind another wave of students. “Professor Onyx,” said Imbraham in that high, odd voice of his. “We are being pursued by a very curious foe. I suggest we regroup with the other faculty at—”

He was cut off by a scream; a student had fallen behind. “Go!” Imbraham barked. “I’ll watch over this group.”

They were off at once, Kianne and Liliana matching strides. Another scream followed; this time, they could see the student, collapsed on the ground and cowering as an insect-like monster loomed over him. “Mage hunters,” Kianne hissed under her breath. Liliana could see more of them boiling out from the shadows, their pointed legs clicking against the stone cobbles.

The creature reared back, the segments of its body glowing, and Kianne sent a geometric lance of force piercing through it. Liliana grabbed the terrified student and pushed him behind her. “Get out of here.”

Something else had caught her attention, though—amid the crawling darkness on all sides, there seemed to be a human figure, a man in a strange red uniform. At least she thought he was human at first glance; there was something wrong with his face, a sharpening and stretching to the cheekbones that reminded her of mandibles. He locked eyes with her, and, with eerie coordination, all of the other mage hunters surged toward them.



“Who is that?” said Kianne.

“I don’t know,” Liliana said. “But it seems he’s controlling these creatures somehow.”

Dean Kianne’s face twisted in horror. “All of them? I’ve never seen magic like that before.”

“There’s always a spell,” muttered Liliana. She extended her hand and black threads of magic shot out from the tips of her fingers, but before



*“Defend the Campus”, by Izzy.*

they could make contact with him, one of the creatures threw itself in the way. The spell burrowed into its shell, making its chitin crack and crumble to dust.

At her side, Dean Kianne lifted her hands, light shining around her. In seconds, a horde of angular, catlike Fractals had assembled. The constructs leapt forward at her direction, colliding with the wave of approaching mage hunters. The man in the red coat faded back into the crowd of churning, spiny bodies, and Liliana was leaning forward to chase him when something stopped her.

All this mayhem. An attack all across the campus, with no apparent aim but destruction and chaos. Why?

Because, as Liliana realized with building dread, it wasn't an attack—it was misdirection.

...

Will ran. He ran as fast as he could, trying not to think about the horrifying creature behind him and its many legs, or the burning in his lungs as he pushed himself harder, or the wet grass beneath his feet that would be so easy to slip on—

*Wait.* Without stopping, Will stuck his hand down toward the ground and applied a bit of focus. Behind him, the evening dew condensed into



hard ice. He turned, looking over his shoulder just in time to see one of the monster's long legs skid off to the side, collapsing underneath it.

"Yes!" shouted Will, shortly before running into something spiky and huge.

He bounced off the second creature's shell as it whipped one claw at him, nicking his uniform but missing anything important. Falling to the ground, he rolled to one side as another claw buried itself in the earth where his head had been a moment before. Will stuck his arms out blind-



*"Mage Hunter", by Mathias Kollros.*

ly, making contact with its armor-plated midsection, and drew the heat from it so fast a crack split through the middle of the shell. The creature fell back, screeching, but by then the other one had gotten up and was scuttling toward him.

Suddenly, a roar filled the air, the sound rolling through the sky. More roars answered it until the ground trembled from the cacophony. The creature leapt away from Will and almost *galloped* on its many legs, moving fast—but not fast enough.

A column of fire shot down from the sky and swept over the ground. All around, Will could hear the shrieks of the invading creatures, could smell the carbon in the air as their shells scorched and popped and blackened. In a moment they were nothing but ashes, scattered to the wind by the beating of giant wings.

Will threw his arms over his head, calling up sheets of ice around himself as another burst of flame ripped through the courtyard. It was barely enough to protect him from the scorching heat, but Will couldn't help the whoop of joy that burst out of him. The dragons had come.

...

Rowan turned at the sound of her name, letting her friends rush past her toward the main campus. There, with a sword of ice in his hand and a goofy-looking slash across the front of his uniform, was her brother. "Will!"



They ran toward each other and fell into a hug, squeezing each other tightly. When Rowan pulled back, she frowned at the makeshift weapon in his hand. "Where's your sword?"

"In our room," Will said between panting breaths. "I came as fast as I could."

"Look out!" someone shouted behind them. Rowan barely had time to register the Oriq agent stepping out from behind the hedge; as he stuck out his hand, thorns of blood-red, lethal energy lancing toward them, she knocked Will to the ground.

There was a gurgling sound, then silence; it took Rowan a moment to realize she had closed her eyes. When she opened them, she saw the Oriq splayed across the ground. Nearby was the familiar stern presence of Professor Onyx, who whirled on them with those cold, violet eyes. "You two. Why aren't you taking shelter?"

"We were attacked," they said—almost at the same time.

"At the Prismari dorms," said Will.

"And the Witherbloom ones," said Rowan. "They were surrounding us—almost like they were trying to keep us in one place."

"That's because they were," said Professor Onyx. "This is part of some distraction."

"Distracting us from what?" asked Will.

"I don't have the answer to that," she said. "Not yet. But I know one thing—the mage hunters aren't just herding in the students. They've formed a perimeter around the Biblioplex."

A perimeter. Rowan didn't like the sound of that. A living wall of spines, of those glowing purple feelers, of snapping teeth. "What should we do?"

Professor Onyx turned those violet eyes on her, then. "If I was a responsible professor, I'd bring you two somewhere safe. I'd keep you well out of all this."

"But you're not going to do that," said Rowan. "Are you?"

The corner of the professor's mouth twitched—Rowan almost would have called that a smile. "No. I'm not quite so responsible as that. And I need help."

...

"So this is our way in?" said Will, putting his hand on the circle of stone. It seemed set into one of the rolling hills in the wilder section of the Witherbloom campus.

"Yes. It's an old maintenance passage I found when I was a student." The professor set her hand on the door and muttered something under



her breath. With a slow grinding that seemed alarmingly loud to Will, the circle of stone parted, retreating into the side of the hill. On the other side was a long, dark tunnel.

"They let students down here?" he asked.

Rowan and Professor Onyx both arched an eyebrow.

"No," said Will. "No, I guess not."

Rowan summoned a sparking ball of light into her hand, then took a few cautious steps down the passage, the professor and Will following close behind.

"Is there going to be, um," started Will. "Anything waiting for us down there?"

"I don't know," said Professor Onyx. "It's possible. Nobody at Strixhaven has used these tunnels in a long time, but I'm hardly the only one that knows about them. I believe Extus has been sending his people through them for months now."

"Extus?"

"The man responsible for all of this. The leader of the Oriq."

Will felt something catch in his throat. "Ah. So the only thing we need to worry about is a bunch of murderous mages wielding dark magic."

"Toughen up, Will," said Rowan. "It's nothing we haven't seen before."

"Is that so?" Professor Onyx seemed amused. "You two are hardly the most likely heroes in all this. But I suppose I'm not one to talk."

What that meant, Will had no idea.

...

Extus strode down the curving corridors of the Biblioplex, running one hand along the fine wooden shelves. So much wisdom in those old books—and yet not a drop of it seemed to be helping them now. It was odd to hear the habitual quiet of this place once again, only now the silence was occasionally broken by the screams of a student caught inside.

"Extus!"

He turned at the sound of his name. One of his agents approached, carrying a heavy book with yellowing, frayed pages. Tavver, if he judged the voice correctly—a younger member, and quite dedicated to the cause. He had already been on several missions deep into the heart of the school.

"I found it in the East Wing, just as you said, sir."

"Fine work." Extus took the book and wiped off a layer of dust. Gilded letters shone in the low light.

"What is it, sir? If you don't mind me asking," said Tavver.



"The work of another brilliant mind overlooked and left to rot. They are so quick to throw us away if we don't suit their purpose." He held out a hand, feeling benevolent. "You will be rewarded for everything you've done today."

Just as the agent took his hand, Extus spotted the student in Silverquill robes over his shoulder. She was bleeding badly, one arm dangling limp at her side, but she glared at them both with an expression of utter fury. He *felt* the hate radiating from the spell she was weaving, an orb of perfect darkness, which she whipped straight toward him.

Without hesitation, Extus tightened his grip on Tavver's arm and pulled him close, spinning him into the spell's path. The agent's body bowed under the impact, a scream bouncing off the inside of his mask as he went limp and dropped to the floor. The student raised her arms, trying to gather more energy, but she was spent. Extus flung a bolt of crackling energy sailing through the air that hit the student dead-on. As she crumpled, the library went quiet once again.

He glanced down at the body of his masked agent, now still. Without a second look, Extus continued on.

...

"You found this as a student?" marveled Will, his voice bouncing eerily off the walls of the stone tunnel.

"How long ago was that?" asked Rowan. She held their only light, a jumping bit of spark-magic that did odd things to their shadows.

"A very long time ago," Professor Onyx said. "It was a very different time, and I was a very different person back then."

They emerged into what looked like a cave chamber. Above, the gray stone ceiling vanished into darkness. A chasm separated the ledge where they stood from another tunnel, which he could barely make out in the low light; a wooden bridge spanned the abyss.

"Um, is there some other way to cross?" Will asked, eyeing yellowing, frayed rope and ancient-looking boards.

"You know, I never found out." Professor Onyx stepped lightly on the edge of the bridge. Rowan followed her, stepping with alarming speed over the rotten planks.

"Slow down," Will said, his pace steady and slow behind her.

"Each minute we waste here is one the Oriq spend hurting people," Rowan said over her shoulder. Each stride forward sent chunks of wood falling into the chasm below.

A crack split the air, bouncing off the walls. Stones skittered down as clouds of dust bloomed around them. Rowan took another step and the wood snapped beneath her.



Will dove as Rowan fell, locking one hand around her wrist. Knocking more of the boards away, he heaved and pulled, lifting Rowan back through the bridge. They landed in a heap, then crawled the rest of the way.

"Thanks," said Rowan, her voice shaky.

"You'd do the same for me."

"Come on," said Professor Onyx, on the other side. She barely seemed to notice their near-death experience. "Hurry along."

"What does he want?" said Will. "Extus, I mean. What is he here for?"

"There are any number of things he could be after. Tomes of great value, magical artifacts—the Biblioplex is full of things an aspiring megalomaniac might want."

"So where are you taking us?"

"I'm taking you where I would go, if I wanted to cause the most damage possible."

Will only stared as she continued down the tunnel.

"We need to keep moving," said Rowan, nudging him forward.

...



*"Hall of Oracles", by Piotr Dura.*

Extus rested one hand on the smooth, cool wood of the double doors leading to the Hall of Oracles. They had been locked, but thankfully, the Oriq attack had happened too quickly for any wards to be activated and set in place. With a brief exertion of will, he blasted the doors off their hinges and stepped inside.

Encircling the room were stern, wizened visages carved in stone—oracles, long dead but not forgotten. Extus thought he noticed a certain scorn in their flinty eyes, as if even from the grave they didn't approve of what he was doing here. As if they didn't think he belonged in their ranks.



It didn't matter. They were dead. And when he was done, they would be glad that they were.

His gaze shifted to the ceiling, and even with his mask he had to squint against its light. The Strixhaven Snarl hung in the air, tendrils of energy whipping and snapping around the hall. Mana from the primordial origins of this world, still swirling in a maelstrom of power. Below it sat a series of stone rings, nearly as old as the vortex itself—containment circles, Extus knew. Its light cast the entire room in a soft blue glow, sending shadows dancing across the floor.

*Yes,* he thought. *This will do.*

Opening the book in his hand, he flipped through the yellowed pages until he found what he was looking for.

Footsteps sounded from the corridor as Oriq agents filed into the room. Each of them carried a book or scroll. Extus nodded, glad that his mask hid the giddy smile stretched across his face. "Good. Array them as we discussed. It's time."

One by one, the agents placed the books and scrolls carefully in front of their leader until the ancient texts formed a semi-circle opened before him. Pausing for only a moment to savor the occasion, Extus began to read.

...

Liliana expected to have to fight her way to the Snarl—there was no way the Oriq would leave their ultimate prize unguarded, after all—but she hadn't expected her charges to be so enthusiastic about this part of their "adventure." She hardly had to kill anyone; at the first sign of one of the masked Oriq, Rowan would zap them with a current of energy that left them twitching on the ground. Even Will was quite useful, forming shells of ice around the fallen Oriq agents so when their muscles stopped seizing they wouldn't be able to do much more than shiver. When they reached the Hall of Oracles, though, the doors were already ripped apart. Inside, she could make out a group of masked figures silhouetted by the rippling light of the vortex within. At their center, one of them was incanting something from a large, heavy tome.

She could feel the arcane currents in the air shifting, listening, in a way she had felt too many times before. Powerful dark magic was at work here; even the Kenrith twins seemed to notice something, both of them going very still at her side.

"We're too late," said Liliana. "He's already bound himself to the Snarl."

"Not yet we're not." Rowan was the first to break the trance that seemed to hold them all, rushing into the room.

"Wait!" called Will, running after her before Liliana could stop him. *Fools—they can't face him with that much power at his disposal!*



Already the masked mages were turning, their hands alight with bright fire and bubbling venom and other crude, vicious spells. Rowan screamed with a mix of fury and a frightening delight as lightning crawled over her skin and jumped to a group of Oriq, unbridled power let loose. Smoke curled from under their hoods as they collapsed. *That girl is a force to be reckoned with already,* thought Liliana. *A few more years and she'll be truly terrifying.*

But Rowan was still too inexperienced to sense the Oriq agent reaching out behind her, fingers crackling with killing power. Liliana concentrated, and time seemed to slow for a moment as she felt, through the arcane energies swirling throughout the air, the little light of the man's soul. With a savage thrust of will, she pushed it free of his body, which dropped in a heap on the floor.

That was when the spell splashed over her. *What?* thought Liliana, head jerking to the origin of the attack. Extus, the man holding that heavy book, had one hand extended. She hadn't sensed the buildup of any offensive magic, though—not the warmth of fire nor the sickly sensation of death magic. What had he hit her with?

Suddenly the room seemed to bend and sway underneath her feet. Everything spun uncomfortably; a sense of vertigo rose up in her stomach. It was a feeling not unlike planeswalking, though sick and twisted. The last thing she saw was the Kenrith boy—looking not at her, but at his sis-

ter. Terrified, though whether it was for her or *of* her, Liliana couldn't say. Then her vision went black.

When she opened her eyes, the light of the Snarl was gone.

Liliana blinked as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She moved to sit up, her hand dragging through dirt and leaves, and looked around, her mind finally clearing enough to recognize the shapes of the forest around her. *Forced translocation magic.* She'd never been hit by that before.

She climbed to her feet. Ahead, she could just make out one of the torches that led the way to Strixhaven. The campus itself was somewhere in the far distance, beyond sight.

*Try not to die, you two. I'm coming—but it's going to be a long walk.*

...

Rowan stared at the spot where Professor Onyx had been, then turned to Extus. "What did you do to her?"

The masked figure made no reply. With a growl of frustration, Rowan extended a hand toward him. The air split with a roar as a bolt of lightning coursed in his direction, but the Oriq leader only gestured toward her. The lightning simply *stopped*, then dropped from the air, shattering on the ground as if made of glass. He waved casually, as though batting a fly, and Rowan saw the air bend and warp as a wave of force rushed



toward her. She closed her eyes and held up her hands—but instead of being torn apart by the spell, she was only peppered with shards of ice as the wall Will had thrown up was shattered.

"Rowan, listen to me!" shouted Will, grabbing her shoulder. "We need to synchronize our magic, like we used to."

"You said it yourself—I can't control my powers anymore!" spat Rowan. "There's something different now. Our magic is changing."

"Yeah," said Will. "You've gotten *stronger*. But I've gotten more controlled. Together, we can do it. There's no other way!"

But that wasn't true. Rowan looked back at Extus and the storm of raw magic surging and glowing behind him. The Snarl, Professor Onyx had called it. She could feel the power radiating off of it, more power than any one mage could use. She could take it, draw it out, just as she'd drawn the power from that Prismari student's water elemental. "We can do what he's doing—we can draw on the Snarl. Use the same dirty trick!"

"That's too dangerous!" said Will. "It's too much power—you'll kill yourself! You'll destroy all of Strix—"

He was interrupted by another wave of force roaring out from where Extus stood. Will threw up another shield of ice, but this time the spell was strong enough to punch through and knock them both across the room.

...

Rowan pushed herself into a sitting position, head ringing. Not far away, she could see Will doing the same. Something was pooling at her feet, she realized, soaking through her boots. With alarm, she saw that it was blood.

Not her blood, though, and not Will's. Rivulets of the stuff seemed to be spreading out throughout the whole room. She traced their path, her gaze drifting toward the Snarl hanging above Extus. Where it had glowed blue before, now it shone a deep red.

A bone-rattling roar shook the hall, sending cracks splintering across the walls and shaking centuries-old dust from the rafters. Another crack ripped through the room and a piece of the ceiling plummeted toward them.

Rowan dove toward Will and they both tumbled away just as the stone crashed into the floor. Another boulder fell, crushing the limp body of an Oriq agent nearby and making Rowan flinch.

More blood flowed from the concentric stone circles on the floor in front of Extus, bubbling as if from a fountain. What had started as a trickle grew into a deluge. The sweet iron reek filled her nose.

Under the Snarl, Extus spread his arms wide. "Rise, Great One! I call upon you, Blood Avatar! Unleash your wrath upon this unfair world!"



From the bubbling fountain of blood in that stone circle, two points began to take shape, stretching and curving into the shape of horns. Something was dragging itself free.

Rowan pushed herself backward until she hit the wall. Not horns, but a helmet of ancient bronze. What rose up, soaked in gore, was massive and only vaguely humanoid. In each of its four muscular arms it clutched a cruel weapon, the edges and spikes too many for Rowan to take in altogether. It was a creature of war, that much was clear. A being whose only purpose was to unmake what had stood for centuries.

This was Extus's plan all along. This was what they had been trying to stop. And now, their failure could mean the death of them all.

# EPISODE V
# Final Exam

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THE BLOOD AVATAR HAS BEEN SUMMONED,
AND IT THREATENS TO LAY WASTE TO STRIXHAVEN.
OUR HEROES ARE GOING TO NEED
EVERY TRICK IN THE BOOK TO STOP IT—
GOOD THING THEY'RE IN A LIBRARY!

---



*"Awaken the Blood Avatar", by Kekai Kotaki.*

The bellowing of the thing in the Snarl was like nothing Will had ever heard before. The roar reached down into his heart, promising every variety of violence and death. With each moment that passed, the creature dragged itself a little further out of the vortex of power. Above Will and Rowan, a rafter plummeted to the floor, crashing with a phenomenal sound inches from their feet.

"They thought I would never make anything of myself—that I didn't belong here, with all of their high and mighty oracles." Extus cackled. He whirled, gesturing wildly at the statues surrounding him. "But where are they now? Who will help you in your time of need?"

Extus's laughter grew more crazed as the Blood Avatar's axe hit one of the statues, splitting the likeness of a former oracle in half. The head and raised arms toppled over, shattering on the ground.

Will helped Rowan to her feet, their robes both soaked with the blood that filled the room—more blood than could have been shed in a hundred battles. "It's going to destroy the school," said Will, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

Somehow, though, Rowan didn't look scared. There was a focus to her eyes that he'd never seen in class, in the study hall, in their dorm. He understood something about his sister for the first time, then—that this is where her talents lay. Running into the storm.



"Not if we can help it," she said, and he nodded.

...

Outside, all across the Strixhaven campus, that terrible roar echoed. It found Dean Uvilda, sealing a pack of escaped Prismari students into a dimension that was to be used for emergencies only; she turned her head at the sound, shuddered, and picked up the pace on her spell. It found Plink and Auvernine, crawling through a dark tunnel of roots and soil while dragonfire overhead reduced everything on the surface to cinders. It found Lukka, even through the concentration it took from him to keep all the mage hunters fighting on several fronts. *So it's done*, he thought.

Lukka grinned down to Mila. "Looks like Extus got what he wanted."

She didn't look at him, though, only stared up at the sky, eyes wide, fur standing on end. A moment later, she jumped under a collapsed awning. Lukka didn't see what she did—not until it would have been too late—but he trusted her enough to dive right after.

The dragonfire scoured the cobblestones where he had been standing a moment before, scorching the pathway black. The swath of mage hunters close by ignited almost instantly, screeching and hissing as they died. Flashes of searing pain flooded his mind all at once, and he severed the link before he could be overwhelmed.



*"Draconic Intervention", by Johan Grenier.*

The mage hunters who had managed to evade the dragons' attack shuddered and twitched as their minds once more became their own. They clicked their many teeth together, spread out those glowing feelers, and turned on the nearest source of magical sustenance: Oriq agents. Fresh screams filled the air as the creatures pounced.

Lukka's eyes went wide as he took in the carnage. Mila took a step forward, but Lukka stopped her with a quick mental command.

This was no longer his fight.

Calling Mila to his side, Lukka turned and ran into the dark.

...



Will ducked away as more debris rained down around them. Just as another statue came crashing to the floor, he saw it: an opening in the chaos. He took a shaky breath and tried to remember the details of the iterated condensation spell. With an exertion of focus, he created a swirling vortex of razor-sharp ice shards and sent them zipping toward Extus, who was still standing before the Blood Avatar. The Oriq's arms were spread; he seemed to be aware of nothing besides his own victory.

Before the ice could reach him, a bolt of lightning cracked through the shards, detonating them and sending the lightning skittering off in random directions. Rowan had seen the opening, too. "Stay out of the way!" she yelled.

"We need to work together!" he shouted back. "All we need to do is—"

He was interrupted by a chunk of falling rubble, which clipped him on the shoulder and sent him sprawling.

"Will!" shouted Rowan, running toward him.

It was impossible to see if her brother was hurt—there was blood everywhere, covering the floor, their robes, splashing up to the walls and over the statues.

She had almost reached him when the creature's enormous sword cleaved into the stone in front of her. It was close enough that she could

see the rust on it, the pocked iron from battles fought eons ago. With a furious shout of her own, she pressed her hands up against it, running a charge up the sword like a lightning rod and into the thing's hand. The monster only pulled its sword free, throwing her backward.

Dragging herself back against the wall, Rowan's gaze swung between Extus, the creature he'd summoned, and Will, who now lay far too still on the ground. It was too much. Blinking against the tears welling in her eyes, Rowan felt a cold anger rising from somewhere inside her—rage, overwhelming the fear and the pain. She couldn't win, but she could hurt the one who did this.

But before she could send a bolt of lightning into the Oriq leader's back, her gaze shifted. The Snarl hung in the air, still brilliant, even in crimson. Still rippling with power.

Rowan took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reached out.

...

The building shook around him, the Blood Avatar of the old world roared with unmatched rage, and to Extus, all was finally right with the world. He turned slowly, taking in the sight of the Hall of Oracles crumbling. They had been fools to pass him over. It may have taken him years to prove it, but as another statue toppled to the ground and shattered into a thousand pieces, he told himself that the wait had been worth it.



His smile faltered as the Blood Avatar's voice broke, the furious roar suddenly cut short. Extus spun on his heels and froze. The creature was moving in jerks and fits, the red light of the Snarl flickering wildly behind it. He had seen this effect before, in his many failures. *It can't be.*

He had checked the calculations. This had to work—there was enough magical energy in one of Arcavios's Snarls to power any spell known to creation. *How could it not be enough?* Then he spotted it: a coil of ghostly vermillion drifting off the nexus, as if being drawn out. An errant tendril of power.

He followed it back, back, to the young blond girl in the corner of the room, staring at him now with wide, hateful eyes. Lightning began to flash and crackle over the girl's hair and skin as the energy of the Snarl rushed into her.

Extus met her gaze, too shocked to move.

There was no way that some pitiful first-year would be the one to ruin all of his plans.

*Was there?*

...



*"Crackle with Power", by Micah Epstein.*

Rowan struggled to breathe as the air around her sparked and hissed with energy. She felt the power rushing through her, power like she had never dreamed. It felt, in that moment, that she could do anything; mountains would crumble before her, cities burn, oceans boil. She opened her eyes, and gasped as she took in the room through a red haze. Her gaze fell to Will, who still lay on the ground, motionless. A fresh wave of rage and grief flooded her as she turned to Extus.



The leader of the Oriq stood before the twitching Blood Avatar, watching her. Waiting.

Rowan let the energy of the Snarl course through her, setting every vein alive with power. She hardly noticed as her feet left the ground, wind swirling as if the air itself feared her. *And it should,* thought Rowan. *Everything should.* She took a deep breath, and the breath turned to white-hot fire in her lungs, and she opened her mouth and screamed and then the fire was rushing toward Extus like a star, like a bolt from heaven. He held out a hand, muttered some words, but whatever he did wasn't enough; the spell crashed into him, sending him flying through the air, robes coiling with smoke. He smashed against the far wall and slid down, still and quiet.

Rowan turned her attention to the Blood Avatar next. The creature still jerked in place, furious that its rampage had been cut short. Inch by inch, one of its swords raised toward her, but it didn't matter. With the power at her fingertips, she could destroy it, and Extus along with it, and anyone who came after. Anyone who tried to hurt her, everyone who had hurt Will—they would *all* burn.

She drew on the power of the Snarl again and it was like drinking fresh, clear water. Arcs of electricity singed her arms and face, sending jolts of pain through her, but she didn't care. Why would she? She was the most powerful thing in the room, in the school, maybe the whole plane. She

extended her hand toward the Blood Avatar, reaching for the familiar jolt of lightning, and a wave of agony suddenly ripped through her.

Her gasps were met with laughter. Through eyes squinting against the pain, she watched Extus somehow pull himself to his feet.

"Did you really think you were strong enough to hold all that power?" Extus sneered. "Did you think you were worthy?"

Rowan ignored the Oriq. In truth, she could barely hear him—all of her was focused on controlling the power that raged within her now. The air around her hissed and twisted like a nest of vipers.

"I have trained in the arcane arts my entire life," muttered Extus. "You're nothing but a child. An arrogant fool. And now, a moth to the flame."

The tendril of power she'd drawn from the Snarl rippled again, and Rowan's vision blared white with agony. All the strength abruptly left her limbs and she flopped limply out of the air, landing with a *thud* on the bloody stone floor.

Extus laughed. "Your ambition is admirable. But I've come too far to be stopped by the likes of you." He turned away, not even bothering to finish the job, and picked up the heavy tome he had been carrying before.

Time stretched around Rowan; she felt cracked open, hollow, emptied out. The Snarl's power still rippled through her, making her limbs dance



and jerk as she lay there. Her consciousness seemed to hover just outside her body—near her brother, who was crawling toward her, dragging himself across the bloody floor. Will was alive.

"Rowan," he hissed through clenched teeth. "Get up."

She tried to remember how to speak, but only managed to let out a bit of air.

"Please," he said, reaching out to touch her. He jerked his hand away as an errant spark rose from her skin. "You have to get up."

Rowan coughed and opened her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Rowan. Just get up." Will crawled closer, putting one of her arms over his neck. He winced as sparks jumped and bit at him, but he didn't let go. "We're going to be okay."

"I'm sorry about the fight. At the Mage Tower match. And at Bow's End. I'm really sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Will said. With a grunt, he dragged her to her feet, and started toward the door. Behind her brother, she saw the Oriq leader hold up a heavy, blood-stained tome and begin to chant.

Together they hobbled toward the doors, only for Will to slow to a stop. He turned to her sharply. "It's like a mascot."

"What are you talking about?" Rowan's frown deepened.

But Will shook his head as he looked at Rowan. "It's like a mascot! We just have to—intercept it."

"Like in Mage Tower?" Maybe the Snarl was still scrambling her brain, but she had no idea what he was talking about.

"Like in Mage Tower," Will said. "Just trust me on this."

Rowan started to respond, but the words fell away as Garruk's face flashed in her mind. She hadn't been able to see what Will could, back then. And it was Will who had finally found a way to free Garruk and win him over as an ally. Will, her Will—her quiet, brainy, peevish brother. He was right so often. Maybe he was right this time as well.

"Rowan?"

Grimacing at the fresh stabs of pain, Rowan pulled at the last sparks of magic within her. "Yeah. Okay. Show me what all that studying can do."

Will grinned and turned toward Extus and the Blood Avatar, red light swirling around his hands. It wasn't ice magic he was working—she knew that much, at least—but the air around him dropped a few degrees anyway. The red light shaped itself between his hands into a thrumming circle of power, and with one last effort, he released the spell.





*"Culmination of Studies", by Bryan Sola.*

Suddenly, a red halo of light snapped into place around the Blood Avatar's helmed head.

"It may be big," said Will through clenched teeth, hands shaking with the effort. "But it's a summoned creature. Which means with this spell, we can control it!"

But the creature didn't seem very controlled. It bellowed again, forcing Rowan's hands to her ears. Below the Blood Avatar, Extus contorted his

hands into claws, his own magic coming off him in wisps like black mist. The red halo around the Blood Avatar's head seemed to flicker in and out. It was Will against Extus, Rowan realized. Each one poured their power into the spell, and Will was losing. But her brother wasn't alone.

She put a hand on his shoulder and he looked up, surprised. "Rowan, what are you—?"

"You concentrate on the spell. Get all the particulars right. I'll do the rest."

Maybe their magic was too different now to meld seamlessly together, as it used to. But if Will had gotten more precise, more controlled—well, she had gotten a whole lot stronger. Rowan poured the last of her magical energy into her brother, sparks jumping and skipping across her hand as her power flowed into him. He gasped, but only for a second. Then, Extus let out a strangled cry, and the red halo snapped into place around the creature, fully formed.

"You brats!" cried Extus. "How *dare* you—"

He was cut off as one of the massive hands of the Blood Avatar closed around him with an awful crunching sound. After that, Extus was silent.

"It worked!" shouted Will. "Rowan, it worked!"



Rowan was swaying in place, though. She was finding it difficult to stay standing; the whole room seemed to be spinning. She was tapped out, utterly emptied of power. It all seemed to happen in slow motion—the red halo flickered out of existence. The Blood Avatar roared furiously as one hand was pulled back into the Snarl, his gore-drenched body stretching and bulging unnaturally, the summoning coming to a violent end. With one more terrifying bellow, he swung that massive iron sword. Will's eyes went wide, and Rowan was too weak to stop him from shoving her out of the way.

The sword crashed into the ground with terrifying force, sending a shudder through the chamber. With a sound like thunder, the Blood Avatar was wrenched back into the Snarl, the sword dragging back across the stone—and on the other side was her brother, lying limp and stunned. Rowan's joy at her brother *alive,* not mashed to paste or cleaved in two, suddenly lurched and drained away in shock: below the knee, his right leg was gone.

As if the presence of that monstrosity had been the last thing holding the chamber together, everything began to fall apart. Rafters swung to the floor like clubs, the stone ceiling they'd held up crashing to the ground in jagged blocks. The floor beneath them shook and pitched wildly as Rowan tried to reach her brother. She was so close—could see his glassy, distant eyes—when the floor collapsed altogether. Rowan and Will tum-

bled and pitched forward, falling through space, until suddenly a light, gentle touch caught them. Rowan spun around wildly; somehow, a cloud of mist seemed to be holding them both aloft.

"There," said Will weakly, pointing up to the doorway of the room. Rowan looked toward the source of the magic, where Deans Nassari and Lisette stood at the destroyed entrance. Brows furrowed in concentration, they sent gouts of magic through the air, blasting away falling rocks and debris. The mist carried them up, up, toward Dean Lisette's outstretched hand. Rowan reached for it, holding Will wrapped in in her other arm, but couldn't quite reach it—until a vine snaked out of Lisette's sleeve, cinching tightly around Rowan's wrist.

Grunting, she hauled them both up into the doorway. All four of them managed to fall out of the doorway just as the room collapsed altogether, filling with a cloud of stone and dust and rubble.

"We did it," muttered Will. "We did it, Ro." His eyes fluttered closed. He looked terribly pale.

"Hold still," said Lisette, crouching over him. "You're in shock."

"Will he be okay?" asked Rowan.

The dean didn't seem to be listening. She bit off a chunk of some sort of root, spitting it into a small shell and pressing it with her thumb. Almost at once it started to glow a strange green color.



"He'll live," said Nassari, putting a hand on Rowan's shoulder. "After what you two have been through, you should be grateful."

What they had been through. Rowan looked back, through the wall of debris now filling the doors to the Hall of Oracles. There was no sign of the Snarl's glow, but she could swear that she still felt it calling out to her.

...

Five weeks later, as the bell tolled across campus to signal the end of first period, Will almost felt as if things were going back to normal. He was getting used to navigating the halls of the school a bit more slowly between his cane and the latticework of ice and steel that now extended down from just under his cloth-wrapped kneecap. He had refused the offers from Dean Lisette of a living wood replacement. His leg was never coming back, and this felt more like a part of him. It was good practice; all day, a part of his mind had to be focused on shaping and refreezing it around the metal frame. A good distraction, too, from the pins and needles that still seemed to crawl over his stump.

Word of his and Rowan's fight against Extus and the Blood Avatar had spread throughout the campus, and suddenly Will was getting a lot more attention. The other students pressed against the wall as he passed, their whispers and stares following him. It almost reminded him of home—he often found himself missing the anonymity of his early days at the school.

At last, he reached his dorm room. The door swung open as he reached for the knob, and Rowan jerked to a stop, almost crashing into him. She stepped back to let Will inside.

Will cleared his throat. "How are you feeling?"

Rowan shrugged. "Not quite back to full strength, but better. You?"

Will tapped his finger on the handle of his cane. Briefly, the runes Quint had helped him put into place—basic ones, for stability and strength, as opposed to the more elaborate variety his friend had pushed for—flared briefly to life, running all the way down to the spread-foot at the base. "I'm adjusting," he said, smiling.

"How's the pain?"

"A little better every day." Though the phantom aches, seemingly coming from muscles that were no longer there, still struck him as eerie.

"I wonder what they'll say about this back home. Can you imagine?"

"Not really. But maybe we should visit when the semester is over."

"Why wait? We could just go now."

"We still have classes."

"We took down a Blood Avatar," Rowan said. "What more could they teach us here?"



"We took down a Blood Avatar with a spell that we learned here," Will countered. "And we still don't know why our spells aren't syncing up. Or why we can only planeswalk together. There's a lot more that they could teach us."

Rowan rolled her eyes and grinned. "Fine. I guess it would be nice to not have to drag you along for the rest of my life. Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

"Yeah, yeah," said Will. "Say hi to Plink and Auvernine for me."

She slipped by, then paused in the hallway and turned to him. It struck Will, then, how much thinner she looked; how the hollow of her cheeks seemed so much darker than before, like something vital had been sucked clean out of his sister. But the smile she gave him was warm and true. "You know I love you, right?"

"Yeah," he said. "I love you too."

As she hurried off, Will shut the door behind him and sat down on his bed. He was tired. It had been a long time since he had gotten a good night's sleep. Another semester here? Another year? Who knew what else the future held. He closed his eyes and extended his magical senses, tracking the beads of moisture forming on his icy prosthetic. *First principle—thermodynamic redirection. Find the heat, and redistribute. . . .*

...

Kasmina's owl flew away from the window and soared over Strixhaven. The damage from the attack was all but erased; cobbles replaced, hedges regrown. The only sign it had even happened was the Hall of Oracles, which was still a ruin, and the small monument that now sat on the landing of the Biblioplex, a stone statue that changed faces every hour. Below it was an inscription: *Lore is never lost at Strixhaven. They will not be forgotten.* This place had survived worse before. It would survive worse in the future, Kasmina had no doubt.

The owl found her at the edge of the campus. She looked out at the wilderness beyond, her mind flowing into the bird that had followed Lukka. The bonder had been wandering the land with Mila and a few of the remaining Oriq, no doubt scheming even as they scrounged for food and shelter.

But he was no longer worth watching. It was Rowan—or, perhaps, both of the twins—who now required her attention.

Liliana finished getting dressed in her office. It had taken days for her to get back to Strixhaven from what had turned out to be a forest near the edge of the continent, but she'd made it, and after the deans had admitted that they should have heeded her warnings, they had invited her to remain a professor at the university indefinitely—without any more damnable faculty meetings, too.



She'd agreed, but with one small caveat.

Now, as she looked at herself in the mirror and adjusted her uniform, she found it hard to believe. Exams. Students. No more demons, no more dark plots, no more death. Her gaze shifted to her desk, where her research journals lay open. "It seems this is where we finally part, old friend."

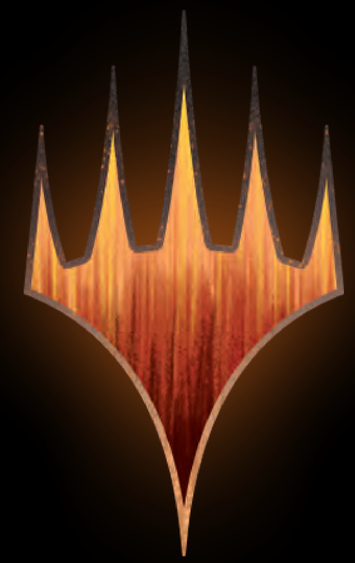
Liliana closed the journals and put them on the shelf along the wall. All considered, he would have been proud. The thought made her smile in spite of herself.

When she finally made it to her first class, Liliana took a moment to collect herself before heading inside. Students hurried to their seats at her arrival, the sounds of shuffling paper and idle chatter dying away as they turned to her.

Liliana came to a stop at the desk at the front of the room. "Welcome to your introductory necromantic arts course, students," she said, voice ringing out in the lecture hall. "My name is Professor Liliana Vess."



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# INNISTRAD
# MIDNIGHT HUNT

By K. Arsenault Rivera

# EPISODE I
# The Witch of the Woods

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ARLINN KORD INVESTIGATES
A NEW BREED OF LARGER, DEADLIER, WEREWOLVES
TERRORIZING VILLAGERS AND VAMPIRES ALIKE.

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*Don't hunt in Kessig,* they said. *The dogs will find you.*

Maybe that had been true right after the Travails, when you couldn't swing a cat without a Wolfir devouring it, but it isn't true anymore. *Those* dogs are dying off, and the woods are keen for the taking. They say you can always tell a Falkenrath by their awful stubbornness about hunting; their ravenous nature; their unending quest to close their talons around the food that least wants to be eaten. To be a Falkenrath is to make your home in the heights, such that everyone else sees you hunt.

Klaus is no different. His feet slap against the brush; blood drips from his slick chin onto the reddening leaves of the Ulvenwald; bolts whistle past his ears. Despite all this, he grins. They saw him, all right. Perhaps the traveling monk disguise was a bit of an affront—the pack of hunters



*"Dire-Strain Rampage", by Darek Zabrocki.*

at his back are worked into a holy froth. He didn't even know they carried so many bolts on them at once—the *thunk thunk thunk* of them is like the rap of a giant's knuckles on the trees around him.

A fallen trunk bars his path; he leaps it and chances a look at his pursuers. Five of them: two big and broad, armed with crossbows more akin to ballistae than anything portable. Cute. But soon enough it won't matter what they carry.



The thought pulls a laugh deep from the depths of his chest. Every drop of his alchemically refined blood calls out for dusk, and dusk has finally answered. A chorus rises within him, a cult begging the arrival of their unseen god, and he knows deliverance is near.

Because the truth is that he's never really been in danger. Dogs could trouble him, holy men can trouble him, other vampires can trouble him—but these humans are no issue at all. Falcons don't fear mice—even if the mice have sharp claws.

"I wasn't aware so many of you had a death wish," he calls over his shoulder. The Elder's blood has him feeling bolder than ever. Will the villagers ever sleep again knowing how easily he wormed his way into their hearts? Likely not, likely not, but that won't stop him from coming back in a few weeks to see. It's important to follow up on your investments.

And sowing fear is always an investment.

Rather than answer him the hunters loosed their bolts, the two largest shooting through the air lightning-quick and thunder-loud. Both aim straight for his head. They're good shots, but he's no stag, no bear, no simpering forest creature. Unnatural speed sees him dodge one and pluck the other right out of the air. A *stake?* My, but they were getting bold, weren't they?

But Klaus, he's in a good mood. Magnanimous even, glutted as he is, the blood still staining the talismans he sold to the unwitting villagers. Stake in hand he leaps up to an overhanging branch. With its secure weight beneath his feet, he turns to face the hunters beneath him.

"Gentlemen, ladies," he says. "I must thank you for the exercise. Truly."

Look at them. Look at the fear written across their faces, the deep lines that worry has carved. Pitiful.

"However, if you fine little morsels will look to the sky, you'll realize what time it is," he says. Already he can feel it, his body straining beneath the glamour, his teeth growing longer and sharper. In times like these a human form is only a hindrance. The other vampiric lines don't seem to realize that, but the Falkenrath do. Strength is the only thing that matters. That strength comes from the blood, and the blood forever separates them from the dregs of human life. Isn't it best to take advantage of it? Isn't it best to see where your blood can take you?

His is just starting to boil.

*"Setting sun, hunting's done,"* he says, but his mouth has already changed, already become something inhuman; his body elongating to a form more monstrous and fearsome than any these peasants have ever seen. It comes out in a growl deep and hungry.



Their fear is delicious to him. Their dilated pupils, their breath ragged as they behold him! The moon parts the veil of the clouds for an instant; its silver light renders his terrifying visage even more apparent, even more horrendous. The air is thick with anticipation.

Klaus bares his teeth.

This is only natural.

And, perhaps, it is also natural what happens next—the hunters sharing knowing looks, their mouths growing into grins just as grisly as Klaus's. One by one they drop their weapons. The largest of them, a man resembling a slab of wood more than a human, laughs in a tone just as deep, just as hungry.

He hardly has time to prepare for it: the moonlight's caress on the awaiting hunters, their bodies exploding from their fleshy constraints into their real forms: Towering beasts, their tongues lapping at their muzzles, their fur doing nothing to conceal the dense slabs of muscle that make up their wild bodies. The two largest are more like a stitcher's dream than any dog he's seen before, their chests like the kegs of beer he once brewed with his father, their arms thick as the trunk of the tree upon which he's perched.

His throat closes up.

"That rhyme," snarls the leader, "only applies to humans."

Klaus knows well when to run, when to flee, when to take to the skies like the falcons he so strives to emulate. He leaps from the branch. If he can change his form quickly enough—

But he can't.

Dogs, after all, can pluck anything out of the air if they put their minds to it.

Jaws crush his chest. He's on the ground before he knows what's happened, the wolves circling, looking down on him as if a two-hundred-year-old vampire is no more to them than a bag of meat.

"You can't do this to me," he stammers. "This isn't how it works. The night—"

"The night belongs to those who take it," says the leader just before his mouth changes to muzzle.

It is the last thing Klaus ever hears.

...

She watches her breath puff up into a cloud in front of her.

If she tries, she can see all sorts of shapes as it dissipates: the wings of a watchful angel, wolves baying, bats circling. Someone, somewhere,



might even try to figure out who she is based on those images. She's heard of that sort of thing—priests who ask you what you see in the sky and use it to determine what it is you're afraid of.

Arlinn Kord knows who she is, but she wouldn't mind having someone to talk to about it. Especially these days. Innistrad's home to her and always has been but Innistrad's never looked like this. There's frost everywhere she looks. Ice clings to the great trees she scrabbled up as a child, a light layer of white dusts the cloaks and coats of the mourning villagers, the familiar crunch of leaves beneath her feet have changed to



*"Arlinn, the Pack's Hope", by Anna Steinbauer.*

something else. Sundials tell her it is nearly six in the evening, but the clock in the center of the village says it's half past four. Sundown's coming sooner and sooner.

And with it, the moon.

Always the moon.

She can feel it even now as she sits in the Elder's old home, even now as she tells his wife that she'll do her best to look into these murders.

"It's every night, isn't it?" the woman says to her. Her voice is hardly more than a creak. "At night, I hear them calling to each other. My Finneas always says that if we mind our symbols we'll be safe from them, but last night . . . "

In the other room, her Finneas's blood paints the walls red. Arlinn swallows. Her eyes fall on the Avacynian symbol right above the fireplace—half solid stone, half wire, and straw. The Travails took much from Innistrad, but faith is a hard thing to break. Even when the object of that faith falls as hard and far as Avacyn fell.

"It just doesn't make sense," says the woman—Agatha. "She was supposed to protect us. Everything seemed . . . For a little while, it was . . ."

Arlinn covers Agatha's hand with her own. Sometimes, in the face of unspeakable odds, a simple human connection can find its voice. Agatha



sniffs. She looks up at the symbol herself, her gaze falling to the ground the moment she beholds it.

"We aren't alone," Arlinn says. "No matter how dark it may seem, the dawn will come—one way or another."

"Easy for you to say."

But it isn't easy to say at all. Especially not for Arlinn, who remembers so vividly the angel's raised spear. For weeks after the Travails her wolves wanted nothing to do with human society and she could hardly blame them. To walk among man was to breathe in their sorrows and bear their weight. The woods brought life, the roads and churches and villages only endless death.

Yet death is everywhere on Innistrad, and to turn from it is also to turn away from the beauty of human endeavor. Living in the woods is easier, yes; simpler, yes; but the triumph of a hunt is a distant second to the triumph of a village against the encroaching night. To build a place where children do not fear the dark takes many years but its rewards last generations.

So she visits the villages and towns of Kessig, doing what she can to fortify them against the darkness.

Agatha throws another log on the fire. As she sits back down into the old, thread-worn chair, she pulls her husband's cloak more tightly around herself. Her breath is misting too. Arlinn considers asking her what she sees in it.

"Miss Kord," she says.

"Yes?"

"It's getting darker, isn't it?"

Arlinn swallows. A glance out the window is all that's needed to confirm Agatha's fears. They both know what the answer is. That she'd even ask speaks to how raw her husband's death the previous night has left her, Kessigers so often rely on their superstitions to keep them safe from things they'd rather not name.

Best not to lie. "Yes, I think it is."

Agatha draws up her knees. "Gustav and Klein say their crops aren't growing the way they ought to. The chill's been bad for them, but they aren't getting any light either."

"Harvest isn't far," Arlinn says. "You'll have to increase stores, but there should be enough to feed everyone this season. The hunters can make up the rest."



"This season," Agatha repeats. "What about the next? And what happens when all of our hunters are . . ."

She gestures to the other room, to the blood Arlinn can taste at the back of her throat. The scent of it calls to a primal part of her—a part that wants to say that the hunters will find more meat than ever when there are so many wolves among them.

"They say it was a vampire. Can you believe that? A vampire out here?" Agatha says. "The watch, they tracked him down. Asked me if I wanted to see his heart. They said it was an easy thing to kill him."

"I think I saw them on my way here," Arlinn says. "Working on . . . it looked a bit like a scarecrow, but much larger. And with fangs. Some kind of effigy."

There's a weak smile on Agatha's face. It feels like progress. "That's the witch's doing. Finneas thinks it's a good idea, that she can help us. Thought it was."

Arlinn pours her another cup of tea. In the chill air the steam curls up out of the cups, reaching higher and higher. The bright scent of herbs makes the gray den brighter.

"Here," she says. "All those tears are going to leave you thirsty, whether you know it or not."

She smiles again and tips the cup to her lips. “It’s good. I don’t know what you put in it, but the spices feel warm.”

“It’s an old family recipe,” Arlinn says. Really, it’s mixed largely based on what felt right to her nose the last time she was out in the woods. “If I shared it, they’d haunt me.”

There’s something like a laugh from Agatha—a short breath, a longer one. “Can’t have that.”

“No, we can’t,” says Arlinn. She pours herself a cup, too. “So—here’s an idea. As long as we’re drinking these two cups, we’ll talk about our families. I’ll tell you all about my brothers, and you can tell me about Finneas.”

Her nod is half-hidden in that oversized wool sweater. “All right. I-I can do that.”

“I’m glad,” says Arlinn. “And afterward, you can tell me more about that witch.”

…

Arlinn knows these woods, and they know her. Everywhere her eye lands, a memory waits to greet her. Here—the scratches in an oak from an old hunt. For two days she and her wolves tracked a white stag through the forest. You’d think it’d be easier to find than it was, but there was something about that stag, something that bewitched her whenever she caught



its scent. By the time she and the wolves cornered it at the foot of a cliff they let it go. Sometimes just laying your eyes on something’s gift enough.

That isn’t what the wolf tells her, though. She remembers seeing it before her: its eyes the pink of blood and water, its fur bright as the snow she so often dreamed about. She remembers the hunger growing in the pit of her stomach. When you’re on all fours it’s so *easy* to taste something, so *easy* to bite and tear and claw. The timber wolves at her side made their intentions known in low growls and gnashing teeth. They were hungry, too.

But there was something of the moon about that stag, something that told her that it was not for their stomachs. Innocent beauty was a rare thing on Innistrad, as rare as innocence, and she’d not be the one to strike it down. Arlinn shifted back to her human form. The wolves sat, grumpy though they were, and said no more as she whispered a blessing.

Away ran the white stag.

Back to the hunt, the wolves.

In the end, finding another meal hadn’t been so difficult. They’d gone to bed, the five of them, curled up around each other with their stomachs filled with less holy meat.

And when in the morning they awoke, there was a skull before them, resting atop a sword driven into the ground. White fur clung to the bone. She knew the sword, she knew the scent that clung to the deer's flesh, she knew the message.

Tovolar never liked her softer tendencies.

Wherever he is and whatever he's doing are no longer her problem. They chose their paths long ago. He found his pack, and she found hers.

The wolves are eager to meet her and eager to play. *Find witches*, she told them, and they're happy to help in whatever way they can. Every few minutes as she runs through the woods she'll hear one call and run over only to find an oddly shaped bough waiting for her, and the wolf looking at her expectantly. She thanks them, of course; even these strange boughs have their own clues waiting.

The further into the woods they go, the more the scent of the place changes. An astringent odor burns the inside of her nostrils; a warm, cinnamon perfume soon follows. When she shifts back to her human shape she can see the bough more clearly: there is a clue here. A series of crescents and rounds line it, shaped by a careful hand. On the end —hanging from a branch—is a polished piece of opal. She squints. Are those shapes carved into it decorative, or are they something more? Agatha said Finneas followed secret signs to find the enclave.





*"Rite of Harmony", by Rovina Cai.*

Arlinn gives her companion a ruffle between the ears. "Good work," she says. "Let's fan out—that way."

He hops up and sinks back down and then he's off like a bolt. It takes her only a moment to shift and follow after him. He is the fastest of her pack. Wolves don't have names in the human sense, but it feels wrong to spend so much time with someone without lending them one. The white line along this one's flank, along with his impressive speed, led her to name him Streak. His mate, Redtooth, follows behind them at a reasonable

pace, always alert for any potential dangers. Patience—so named when she waited outside the cathedral doors for her every day—raced Redtooth for third. Sometimes she'd even pull ahead. Boulder, the largest and friendliest of them, brings up the rear, his tongue flapping every which way.

Now that she knows what to look for, following the symbols is easy enough. She can give herself over to the hunt—the leaves underfoot, the chill forest air, her senses alight with life. Running on four feet feels so much more natural than jogging on two. Sometimes, she thinks that she might not even be running in her human form at all.

Boulder's excited howl is only the first. They all feel it, the thrill of this untamed wild, the dangers of Innistrad made distant by the joy of the moment. Arlinn joins them. For this moment, at least, she wants to feel free.

But no sooner has the howl left her than she sees it: a stag, pure white, beneath a branch festooned with carved silver. His pale pink eyes lock with hers.

Arlinn skids to a halt. Hackles rise along her back; she growls to the others to stop. Something's wrong. There can't be two of them, and to encounter it *here* of all places...someone must be trying to trick them.

She isn't going to be fooled. A deep breath of the air lends her some insight—as does the Stag simply pacing its way around the gathered group. First—it doesn't smell anything at all like a stag. Sweat, yes; dye,



yes; even the scent of magic, but nothing like a stag. Second, it isn't acting like one either. Everything in the forest runs from a pack of wolves. The only exceptions are other werewolves. But this isn't like that, either.

The stag paces around them. Redtooth lowers her muzzle and snarls as he draws near. The stag draws away, locking eyes once more with Arlinn. The way he's tilting his head is the last clue she needs.

Arlinn barks an order at the others to stay put. She slinks behind a tree and shifts back to her human form. Patience bounds over with her leather pack—she reaches in for her clothes.

"Katilda, isn't it?" she calls. "I hope you'll give me a moment to make myself decent."

The woods around her seem to laugh—she feels the thrill of it against her back as she changes. It's only as she looks around that she realizes they're beneath one of the massive stone arches of the Celestus. Something about the structure had always reminded her of a clock's inner workings. At times, it was said the arms shifted about the central platform—which itself was as large as any village green. Arlinn had never seen it happen herself, but she'd had all sorts of ideas about what ancient rituals must drive it. They must have gone deep into the woods, Arlinn's mother always used to caution her to turn back whenever she saw the broken rings rising from the earth. As a child, she wondered what it would be like to

climb their wide flat surfaces—if the people in Thraben woke up every day with that sort of view. Maybe if she got up there herself she could pretend to be some pampered noble. Now, as an adult, she eyes the carvings along its pitted surface with worry, the lenses with distinct unease. Her mother had been right to warn her of the Celestus. Whatever purpose it once served is best left to the past.

"If you'll forgive my little trick, I'll forgive you getting dressed," comes the answer. Her voice is at once charming and distant. She sounds, Arlinn thinks, like the sort of village matron who figured out a long time ago that you were the one stealing her pies. "The wolves in this forest aren't typically so well behaved. Most of them would have attacked."



*"The Celestus", by Jonas De Ro.*



Arlinn rounds the trunk. Where there had once been nothing but trees and underbrush she now sees an enclave: branches and hides fashioned into tents, decorated with the same crescents and spheres she'd seen earlier. Floating candles lend the place an eerie light, as do the strange scarecrows throughout. Arlinn frowns. Candleguides—that's what her mother used to call them. There's an old story about one saving a boy lost in the woods and walking with him all the way to the Harvesttide festival. Another story told of hunters stalking through the Ulvenwald in search of pelts. One year, none returned. The next, these guides sprang up, born of their family's anxieties. She never expected she'd see one in person, let alone so many. The grins carved into their dripping-wax faces . . . only on Innistrad could those things be comforting.

But there are people, too, in the enclave—perhaps two dozen of them. Some women, some men, some seeming to eschew such labels. Clad in elaborate headdresses they mutter spells before the Candleguides. A dark-skinned man carves a grinning pumpkin, the swinging moonstones on his headdress winking in the light. Two women surround a cauldron bubbling and broiling. Perhaps it's the chill in the air, but Arlinn can see the smoke rising up from a few yards away. And so, too, can she smell the delicious brew.

And there is one woman sitting before them on a mossy stump, a staff laid across her lap. Her white hair is looped through the many branches

of her headdress; the pale crescent and sphere painted on her dusky skin only serve to make her features blend in. It's hard to tell, exactly, whether the wolves or Arlinn herself catch more of her attention—but it is clear that she finds this all very amusing.

"We aren't most wolves," Arlinn says. Looking out at the enclave, she narrows her eyes. "And I take it you aren't most witches."

They can't be—Arlinn smells no evil in the air here. However frightening the shadows their headdresses lend them, however strange the paint renders their features, there's no mistaking they're human. That in itself is some comfort—even if she has no idea what they're up to. The magic here doesn't smell like typical magic. Like something that's been left to ferment, it has the scent of age to it.

"That depends on who you ask," says Katilda. "Before the Archangel's arrival, we were most witches. With her arrival we took to the shadows and now that she has departed, we are once again in the light."

Arlinn tilts her head. "You don't seem that old."

"It need not have been in this form, with this name," Katilda says. She points with her staff at the tree Arlinn's standing near. "An acorn is not, in itself, an oak. Given time, water, *sun*—it may become one. So it is with us."

"Then you're regrowing something," Arlinn says. "Who are you?"



"We are what was once and will be. We are what the dark cannot kill. We are the Dawnheart Coven." The woman speaks with the voice of three, her eyes flashing with every syllable. The tip of her staff glows. She taps it to the earth. The brush surrounding them springs to life, growing rapidly, taking strange shape. In a matter of seconds Arlinn recognizes it: the proud head of the white stag. "But who are you, wolf?"

"My name is Arlinn Kord," she answers. She doesn't look the branch-stag in the eye, not even when the eyes flower. She knows well enough the scent of nightshade. "There won't be any Dawnheart Coven if there isn't any dawn—and at this rate there won't be one for long. I'm here for answers."



*"Katilda, Dawnhart Prime", by Bryan Sola.*

"You didn't give me one." Another tap from the staff—vines flow to fill in the gaps of the stag's head. It walks two steps, then bows to Katilda: a supplicant before a strange sovereign. "But we'll leave that aside for now. My answers for you are as clear as the forest around you and the beating of your own human heart."

Streak's beating his tail against the earth. Arlinn's not feeling much more patient herself. This witch, this Katilda—what is it with people like her and dragging things out? "Could you make them a little clearer?" she says. "My eyesight isn't what it used to be."

The witch touches the staff to the stag's head. From it, a crown of branches and flowers. "There is a ritual for just this."

Arlinn doesn't watch the stag bound away—she keeps her eyes on Katilda. "If there's anything I've learned, it's that rituals are never easy."

"Therein lies their power—a ritual centers the community and its traditions. Over time hundreds add their faith to its power, far surpassing anything a single mage might dream of doing," says Katilda. "The Archangel distracted us from these traditions. We must return to them—to Harvesttide."

Avacyn didn't distract anyone from anything—but now isn't the time for that particular fight. No matter how much it burns in Arlinn's chest. "Harvesttide? Like in the old stories?"



"The very same," answers Katilda.

"Spiced tea and pies?" says Arlinn. The fire's burning hotter. As an Avacynian priest, Arlinn knew well how strong the Archangel's protection had been. "How are those supposed to save us?"

"Harvesttide is more than that," she says. "The sun and moon both have their turn in the sky. Harvesttide is humanity's turn—our celebration of living another year in defiance. Too long we've lived in fear, too long we've relied on external forces to save us. We must save each other. By gathering together—"

"Wait," says Arlinn, holding up her hands. "You're planning on gathering *how* many people?"

"As many as will come," says Katilda, with all the patience of a village priest. "Together, we can draw on our collective strength beneath the Celestus, and through it restore the balance."

Arlinn shakes her head, her exasperation breaking through. "Might as well send a letter to every night stalker in Innistrad. Putting that many humans in one place is begging for an attack. We've seen enough death already; we don't need to stake more lives on some old story you read in a book somewhere—"

"I didn't read it in a book," Katilda answers. Now she's gone sharp, too, standing from her stump. To Arlinn's surprise she's a towering woman—sturdy as the oaks she praised. A faint scent of loam hits Arlinn's nose—but it doesn't make sense. Katilda's no ghoul. "There will be wards, Arlinn Kord. Guardians, who can now exchange what they've learned to drive off the dark. You want to bring back the dawn? Very well. But you cannot do it without bringing back the hope we've lost."

Redtooth's growling, so is Streak. Their discomfort echoes in Arlinn's chest: there's no way this is going to go well. Yet as she stares the old witch down, there's no sign of a break.

"You haven't even told me how this ritual works," Arlinn says. "Assuming we don't all get killed first."

"We?" answers the witch—but she does not linger over the barb. Instead, she points with her staff to the arch of the Celestus. "The answer, as I told you, is right here. We use the Celestus. At its center is a lock of bright gold—we need the Moonsilver Key to activate it. Haven't you ever wondered what it's for? Our ancestors used it for just this—righting the balance of day and night."

"In the Kessig Woods, surrounded by the enemy."

"Yes. To stoke the fires—"



"—of Hope," Arlinn cuts in. "And if we don't? If we find some other way—"

"There is no other way," Katilda says, just as firm. "If the Celestus isn't activated—and if it isn't activated *properly*—then the night will overtake the day. Geists, ghouls, vampires, werewolves—you will feast on us until—"

"I'm not—"

But a sound cutting through the woods stops her voice in her throat. A howl, rough and deep. A sound that makes sets the wolf within her alight. Her pack answers and she can feel their joy, feel their eagerness for the hunt.

For she knows that howl well. She heard it for the first time years ago, huddled in her room, staring up at the symbol meant to keep her safe. And she had torn from her family's home, feet and hands against the damp midnight earth, running toward it with all she had—because it spoke of a fearless world.

The first time she heard that howl was twenty years ago—the first night she tasted blood, the first night she tasted freedom.

It still stirs her, even now.

Tovolar.

# EPISODE II
# The Motives of the Wolf

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ARLINN MUST CONFRONT HER PAST
AND HER OLD MENTOR, TOVOLAR. WHEN HER
WOLVES ABANDON HER TO JOIN HIS PACK,
SHE CALLS THE GATEWATCH FOR HELP.

---

"These woods belong to us," he told her. People said he didn't talk much, but he talked to her. Maybe it was because this was her first hunt. She was a wild mess of a girl then—streaked with dirt and blood and earth. Distantly, she thought to herself that she should start braiding her hair if this was going to keep happening.

"But what about Kessigers?" She felt compelled to ask.

Tovolar grunted.

He stared straight back at her, and she straight back at him. It only made sense to ask. She hugged her legs closer to her chest. "It's just—I think we can share."



*"Tovolar, Dire Overlord", by Chris Rahn.*

How strange she must have looked, covered in blood, looking out toward the village to which she was too afraid to return. The village she was now defending. Tovolar had stayed with her after she changed back. She was glad for the company—the thought of being alone right now was worse than the thought of facing her family. Somehow, as bad as this was, it was easier to deal with knowing that she wasn't alone.

Tovolar was Kessig's own personal bogeyman. She'd heard about him all through the last four or five years, heard what he did, and a lot of



things he didn't do. Whole herds of cattle slaughtered. Houses broken into and torn asunder. They said he killed vampires, they said he dabbled in dark magic, they said he was all sorts of things.

But in the morning, when she woke as she did, he had gotten her a blanket and sat quietly at her side. The man sitting next to her was all muscle and tooth, yet he made himself smaller to keep from frightening her. In his own quiet way, he explained what had happened.

The first thing she asked was if she'd killed anyone. He said "Not tonight." And so their conversation, such as it was, began. This was the first moment of truly uncomfortable silence.

But then he stood. He did not need to ask her to follow.

She simply did.

...

She shifts before she knows what she's doing—dives into the woods near the witch and goes, her clothes dropped haphazardly along the way. The wolves don't wait for her. Streak's bounding in front of all of them—but he chances to look back at her, and she nods to him.

The howl pierces the silence of the woods, the silence that is not silence, the silence that is the thousand teeming lives within. She knows it. She knows him.

And he, of course, knows that she's here.

She doesn't know why she expected any different.

She doesn't know what she expects when she catches up to him.

…

"Hunting is who we are," he told her.

She didn't like this. There was something wrong with it—some dark magic in the air. In the early hours of the morning, they might see anyone and anything; surely, there would be hunters in the forest? Surely, there would be people—people from the village, even, who might see her with him and know what had happened to her?

"But if it was just hunting, people wouldn't be afraid," she said to him. "We don't have to kill *people*."

She'd seen the good reason, like any other Kessiger. People pulled bodies out of the woods every morning. You had to, especially after full moons. Werewolves were enough to deal with—no one wanted to add geists to Kessig's compounding problems. Hunters often visited her father in the smithy to seek new weapons. Sometimes they even spoke about what they saw—about the beasts bigger than two men stacked together, who tore through flesh as easily as the elder Kord tore through paper. Their weapons adorned the house—and so, too, did all of the holy symbols that didn't sell.



Her father said they would protect her. So did everyone else.

But Arlinn never found much comfort in the dour outlook of the village. With them it was always about what she couldn't do—she couldn't go into the woods, she couldn't play her flute too loudly, she couldn't greet strangers or make new friends when travelers came through. Caution and the angel kept them safe, that was the thought, but they also kept her world small and boring.

*We don't trust you. Go away*—that was what her village said to the world. Wasn't there room for more?

And when she heard the howl, she realized that there was something more. It sounded so happy, so soothing, so . . . so like an old friend.

A life free of walls, free of holy symbols, a life free of fear and full of something *else*.

Under cover of night, she left.

Tovolar glanced back at her. "That what you think?"

"Yes," she answered, with all her heart.

He shook his head and kept walking. She followed.

…

Seeing things never felt the same after her first hunt. She hadn't realized how limited her human eyes were until she saw with the wolf's; hadn't realized the visual is truly only a small part of the world. She cannot see the grubs wriggling through the underbrush with her human eyes; she cannot smell blood in the air from miles away with her human nose; she cannot taste the sharp tang of the night with her human tongue.

But as a wolf, she can do all of those things. And she knows that he's just up ahead. She catches his scent long before she can see him. So, too, the scent of the others around him—some familiar, and some decidedly not.

*What have you gotten yourself into?* She wonders.

When at last the trees break enough for her to catch sight of him she skids to a halt. He is there, his eyes piercing as ever in the night, surrounded on all sides by huge wolves. Arlinn is by no means the runt of the litter but these newcomers have arms thick as the trees around her. One's wearing a ship's chain as a bandolier. Isn't it early in the night for them to have changed?

Tovolar, flanked by his packmates, looks about the size of a human man. But he isn't. That much is clear as Arlinn makes her way to him, as his gruff face tries to smile for her. "You came home."

"I came to investigate," Arlinn says. Looking the newcomers up and down she suppresses an instinctual growl. "Who are these guys?"



Tovolar stops near Redtooth. Arlinn's hackles rise.

He meets her eyes, then walks away.

He does not need to say follow me.

...

Arlinn's stomach threatened to empty. A sweet, pungent miasma forced its way down Arlinn's throat. She knew precisely what lay ahead of them and she wanted Tovolar to stop leading them. She wanted to stop following him.

But where would she go if she did? She was a wolf now, just like him. No matter what happened there were good odds she'd end up rampaging if left to her own devices.

She couldn't just leave.

So she followed, and when at last Tovolar pointed out the bodies to her, she did her best not to vomit. Her best wasn't very good. Three hunters torn apart like common animals, their ribs exposed to the brightening day, their faces locked in rictus terror. Crossbows and silver bolts scattered around them like pine needles. Blood-soaked symbols of Avacyn clutched in their hands. Everywhere she looked there was something worse to see, and everywhere she looked her stomach threatened to empty, until at last it did, and all the raw venison she'd enjoyed came up out of her.

Tovolar grunted. He set his hand on her shoulder, then turned her to face the bodies again.

"Please," she stammered. "I don't want to look."

But he kept one hand on her shoulder. "You have to understand."

She sucked in a breath. "But why? What is there to . . . ?"

He let go of her then, long enough to stride over to the bodies. What might have taken her three steps took him only one. Kneeling next to the bodies he looked up at her again. "Last night, how did it feel?"

She swallowed. "Like being free. But it isn't worth—"

"Being free is worth whatever we pay for it," he answered. Standing, he kicked one of the bodies with the tip of his boot. "I'm tired of hiding."

And how strange it was that hiding was all Arlinn wanted to do.

...

She smells them before she sees them.

More wolves. Plenty of them. They wear human forms now but that does not change what they are, does not change the hunger they feel, does not change them in the eyes of the villagers. They are wolves—and she is, too.



She sees them comparing armor pilfered from cathars; she sees them, painting patterns on skin that will show just as well on fur; she sees them, fighting like newborn pups. There are so many new faces and new scents that they leave her dizzy, shifting back to her human form as the horror of it starts setting in.

Because her eyes, of course, aren't telling her the whole story.

Those wolves don't smell like Mondronen. They're not part of Tovolar's pack. So why are they here? And the others—those who, like Tovolar's



*"Unnatural Moonrise", by Ryan Pancoast.*

guards, stand head and shoulders above their rest, their faces seemingly caught mid-shift—who are they?

This is more than just a hunt.

The howls coming to her ears tell most of it. As a child she'd plug her ears to try to keep the sound away, but there's no hope of doing that now. Dozens of wolves all calling to each other in the night; maybe even a hundred voices proclaiming to each other: *I'm with you, I will hunt.*

And that voice is lodged at the base of Arlinn's throat too, as moonrise draws ever nearer. Already some of the more eager—like Tovolar's guards—have begun their transformations. The crack and pop of bone lend the distant howls asynchronous percussion.

Tovolar turns toward her. There is a smile on that face, there is pride in his eyes as he gestures widely to the wolves around them. As they walk further in he is greeted by howls so high Arlinn feels them on her skin—and by what used to be the Mondronen Howlpack's salute.

"Who are all of these people?" she asks him.

"Family," he answers. "Our new pack."

Arlinn frowns. "Not much of a family reunion to me. Looks more like you're getting ready for something."



His shoulders rise in a laugh he can't quite voice. The sound echoes. She knows that look. She knows she won't like the answer.

But she stays for it anyway.

"Getting ready to take what's ours," he says. Behind him two of the new wolves, already changed, tear down trees to serve as clubs. "Used to be just the woods. Now the nights are, too."

Streak nuzzles against him. Stopping their trip, Tovolar kneels to pet him. Boulder thwaps his head against Arlinn's shoulder, as if asking permission to join him. Arlinn swallows.

"Tovolar," she says, her voice dropping low, "just what are you hunting?"

Trees coming down. Wolves, howling. A man with an obelisk slung over his shoulder. The air, thick with the scent of hunger. Blood, too—someone's already killed. She can hear jaws tearing flesh asunder. It isn't far.

The moon's climbing higher and higher.

Tovolar touches the tip of Streak's nose, runs his hands over his ears. Streak never sits this well for her. He isn't moving at all, not even swishing his tail. Tovolar touches his forehead to Streak's, then points—and away the wolf goes, hungry as the night.

Arlinn's stomach sinks. It's only hunger. He'll be back. But she doesn't want to waste any more time. He stands again, towering over her, as always, looking about the gathering before back down at her.

"Whatever we want. Bloodsuckers, when we can find them. The Dires have a lot of fun making them beg."

"Dires?" She stares, but she already knows who he means—the wolves at his sides, the behemoths. "Hunting vampires is one thing, but you can't—"

A sharp grunt stops her or perhaps the old reflexes attached to it. His brows narrow, his lips pull back from his teeth, and as the light falls on his face, his teeth grow longer.

"We can do whatever we want," he says. "I tried to teach you that."

More howls, closer now. Arlinn's heart hammers in her chest. She wants to hunt. She wants to run.

She plants her heels. "No, you can't. People have been living in these woods for generations; they've carved out lives for themselves. All they want is a life without fear, the same as us."

He draws up to her, eyes burning. "Too much church in you," he growls. "Too little wolf."



When he looks down on her, she is again standing in the wood with him, again staring at the bodies of the cathars, again afraid.

...

When she returned that morning, her mother waited in the drawing room. The years wore heavy on her—but this night was heavier than most. The woman's shoulders slumped; great bags formed beneath her eyes; when she threw her arms around Arlinn's embrace they were small and weak.

"Where *were* you?" she creaked. "Arlinn, they found four of our boys down in the woods, torn right apart just like . . . "

And she could have told her then. She could have been honest.

But her eyes fell on one of the angel's symbols, shaped by her father's own hands, and she knew that she couldn't tell the truth.

...

Arlinn isn't some young pup anymore. She isn't afraid anymore.

Moonlight makes it easier to shift. Her bones crack and rearrange, forge themselves into something at once new and old. Tovolar falls into relief before her.

He's smiling.

She hates that he's smiling.

...

On the first hunt, she ran with Tovolar. On the second, Tovolar and three others. On the third, she ran with the pack.

Tearing through the forest, lost in the thrill of the hunt, all she wanted to do was sink her teeth into the sumptuous flesh of a deer. And she thought, foolishly, that she might even keep her mind long enough to drag it back to the village—to her father's smithy, maybe, where she could say that maybe one of the boys up the road had left it for them.

When your barn is full of mice you get yourself a cat. When your woods are full of werewolves, you send out your best hunters. It's only natural.

She remembered seeing the deer, it looked up at her while lapping at a river, pelt white as the moon, eyes red as blood.

She remembered jumping for it.

She remembered the pain that followed, sudden and sharp; the breath knocked out of her; the crack of her back on the rough ground.

She remembered looking down and seeing the bolt buried in her chest.

She did not remember very much else except that in the morning she awoke surrounded on all sides by the grisly remains of the kids who used



to steal pies from her mother's window. Hunters, now—their crossbows just within reach.

Her mouth was slick with their blood.

She screamed, then, that was that.

...

This is the only time she'll ever tower over him—when she's transformed and he hasn't. Now she's the one who snarls at him. The others gather around in a circle, some shifting from the excitement, some simply hungry for the taste of blood. Weapons and paws and feet beat against the earth: *thump. thump. thump.*

She rounds on him, but he does not move.

"You want to hunt," he says.

And it's true that she does. To be among those like you is a dizzying feeling. These wolves know her, though she does not know them; they know the struggle of existing in a world like this. The world wants them dead. Isn't it right to live despite that? Isn't it right to take their lives back, by force if they must?

It isn't. No matter how appealing it may seem, it isn't.

She has to stop him. If she strikes him down now the struggle for who controls the hunt might delay things enough to get some kind of help.

Down comes the claw.

But before it can make contact, Boulder's in motion, jumping in front of him. Arlinn pulls back at the very last moment, her heart sinking into her stomach.

It only takes a moment of thought to figure out what's going on, only takes studying Boulder's friendly face turned at once hopeful and hungry.

Streak joins him. So does Redtooth. Only Patience remains at Arlinn's side—but even she's looking up at her expectantly.

They want to hunt.

Tovolar smirks. "Your pack understands."

One by one the wolves around them change. How many are there, already changed? How many stand on their haunches waiting for her to draw blood?

Patience waited for her every day, once. Now Arlinn is the one who lingers.

...





*"Pack's Betrayal", by Sam Rowan.*

There were symbols everywhere inside the Church. In the mornings, when dawn's light first pierced the stained glass windows, there were no shadows save those in holy shape. Arlinn treasured the dawn above all else. Each sunrise was a new victory against the beast within herself; each clean-handed morning a promise to her future self. The beast was gone.

Services began the moment the sun crested the Kessig hills. At first, she had not been permitted to hold them herself, but she attended every

day with a feverish need for safety, as if the sight of the illuminated angel alone could bring her salvation.

Perhaps it could.

Or perhaps it was the people.

The same people at every service. The same people huddled around sacred texts. Barnaby always teasing her about being the first one into the cathedral—but becoming the second person soon after. Trusting herself enough to spend a night baking with Luciana, who swore she had better recipes, but should have known better than to wager against a baker's daughter. Father Zakarias, always gently asking if there was anything else she'd like to confess, and reassuring her when she lied to his face.

Safety and warmth. Good people. The morning light promised all of this and more, and for years, it was enough. In time, she stopped worrying about what drove her here.

Until he showed up to morning services.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The look of him was enough. The wild in him called to the wild in her: the scuffs of dirt on his borrowed armor, the smears of rusted red against the white and burnt yellow, the scents of fire and blood and pine. All he did was sit next to her. Didn't say a word.



But she knew with a dull, sinking horror what would come next.

Afterward, he left, and all of her new friends asked what was wrong, and she told them that she didn't want to talk. She wanted to leave. Needed some time to herself. She'd be all right.

Arlinn locked herself in her room that night—pulled the curtains over the windows, wrapped her vestments tight, laid holy symbols wherever her eyes could find them.

But it was hard to see them in the dark.

Maybe that was why it happened.

Maybe that was why it wasn't enough.

But she'll never really know, not now, why it happened the way it did, or what unfathomable kindness drove Luciana to check on her.

She remembered the blood. She remembered the hunt. She remembered wanting to be anywhere but there.

And then, suddenly, she was.

...

To relive history is to tear open a wound and hope it will heal differently this time.

*He* wants to hunt, her wolves want to hunt, the pack wants to hunt.

She doesn't. And she has to keep them safe as best she can.

Arlinn kneels. She strokes Patience's head, scratching that spot between her ears, and gives her a final embrace.

"Keep everyone safe," she says. Her muzzle's awkward in this form, the words don't make sense, but she hopes Patience knows what she means. A pat on the haunch serves as final permission. Arlinn stands, and Patience walks to him.

The gathered wolves holler and howl, each sound a dagger in Arlinn's heart.

Tovolar nods. "When you're ready for the new world, come find us."

He starts to shift. She doesn't stay to watch.

...

She finds her way back to the witch. It isn't hard—she's got the scent now—but it does take some time, since she stops whenever she hears one of her wolves among the howlpack.

There are no pleasantries. She doesn't have time or energy for them.

"I'll get your Key," she says.





*"Dawnhart Wardens", by Joshua Raphael.*

If Katilda notices the wolves are gone she says nothing about it—instead, she invites Arlinn into the warm light of the fire.

There are no wolves here.

But there are people, and there is something close to holy light, and for tonight it will have to do.

...

Morning light brings new friends.

For an ancient witch, Katilda is a popular one. At first light, she and her witches gather in the center of the camp. Magic pours from them in streams, scattering out into the air. Katilda tells her it's a Calling something to let the coven's chosen champions know it's time to gather.

Arlinn has a Calling of her own, but it's not one the coven can see. While they're conducting theirs, she sneaks off to Ravnica. Nothing's ever simple there. To even get *access* to Jace's house she needs to fill out three forms and swear two oaths—and in the end, he isn't even there. But that's fine enough—there's still friends to be had, and a legend as well.

Arlinn's heard of Teferi in passing—mostly of some kind of plan he was cooking up with the others—but she wasn't expecting him to be so . . . approachable. Disarmingly so, even. He's the first one to greet her as she comes through the door. The easy smile counts for a lot—but so, too, does dealing with someone close to her own age.

Not that he's her age. He's much older. Almost unfathomably old. As he pours her a cup of tea she tries not to dwell on the implications.

"Take it you didn't just come here to keep me company, Arlinn," he says. "You look like you haven't slept."



"That obvious, huh?" she answers. The tea is good—smooth and full-bodied, surprisingly so given how short the steeping time was. All the same, her mother's is better. She misses it.

"If you're going to ask if I can stretch out the night so you can rest up, the answer's no," he says. It's said with warmth, but Arlinn can't hide the flinch. Teferi leans forward. "Sorry, that seems like it hit close to home."

Arlinn doesn't bother beating around the bush. "The nights on Innistrad are getting longer, but that means no one's getting any rest. It's why I came. Something's coming—the wolves are . . . "

She can't bring herself to finish, doesn't even know where to start—but she doesn't have to. At least not for another few minutes. Someone emerges, stretching cat-like atop the stairs, someone who hops with excitement when she realizes there's a visitor. Chandra jumps the banister (and the stairs) just to get to them quicker.

"Arlinn!" she calls, plopping herself down in one of the tables next to them. "Hey, did you bring that recipe for—"

Maybe Arlinn *does* look as dour as she feels—Chandra stops mid-sentence. Arlinn sighs. "I'm afraid it'll have to wait," she says. "As I was telling Teferi—"

But the door opens again, and another new face is staring back at her. A raised brow soon follows. “So you’re the one who used pencil on the ink-only forms?”

It’s all so ridiculous, but it’s ridiculous in the way that she needed.

It feels a bit like mornings with Barnaby and Luciana.

Arlinn allows herself to laugh, just this once, just to remember what it is she’s fighting for.

Humans run in packs, too.

...

They listen. She’s grateful. The stranger’s name is Kaya, and the idea of day and night falling out of balance upsets her in that quiet way that leads to a decisive change. They’ll come. They’ll help. But first, they need to meet Katilda’s people.

When they reappear in the woods together, Arlinn knows immediately which way to go. She’ll take the towering Kessig oaks over the cramped buildings of Ravnica any day—she never feels like she can breathe there.

Beneath the trees and the arcs of the Celestus they walk back to the coven. Chandra looks up at the old artifact with pure wonder and curiosity. Arlinn envies it a little—but truth be told, she feels some of that wonder herself to this day.



By the time they arrive there are a couple dozen new faces there, too. So many in one day—it’s going to be hard to keep them all straight. But she’ll learn. And she wants to. Because the three at her back know what she is, and not a single one of them looks at her in fear.

Perhaps it will be the same for the gathered cathars and mages up ahead. No one Arlinn knows personally, but she knows all cathars and priests after a fashion—you wear someone’s clothes long enough and you get an idea of their character. They stand in a throng centered on the witch: six or so cathars, a couple of priests, and the rest hardy Kessigers of no particular stripe. Standing the proudest among them is a dark-skinned woman in white armor, a light dust of snow on her shoulders. If you asked a child to describe the bravest cathar they knew, you’d get someone like her: the well-polished armor, the noble features, broad shoulders, and gentle eyes. She’s listening as Katilda explains something—but both of them turn toward the approaching newcomers.

“Arlinn Kord, I take it?” calls the cathar. Her voice is rich and resonant—clearly, she’s learned to project.

“The same,” Arlinn answers. “These are my friends—Kaya, Teferi, and—”



*"Adeline, Resplendent Cathar", by Bryan Sola.*

"Chandra Nalaar," the pyromancer cuts in. "My name's Chandra. What's *your* name?"

The cathar smirks and chuckles. "Adeline's fine. It's nice to meet you, Arlinn, Kaya, Teferi, and Chandra Nalaar. Katilda says you're here to help with Harvesttide?"

Arlinn has the feeling Chandra would help with whatever it was Adeline asked of her, but they can't let their eyes stray too far from their goal



here. "We're here to help find the Key," Arlinn answers. "Festivals aren't much my thing, I'm afraid."

Kaya clears her throat behind her. "You didn't mention anything about a festival."

"Katilda thinks it's necessary," Arlinn answers.

"It is," says Katilda. Her voice somehow carries despite the small distance between them and as the heroes rejoin the larger group, her eyes stay fixed to Arlinn's. "The ritual is a precise thing with little room for error. You cannot skip steps in ancient magic."

"It's a temperamental thing," echoes Teferi. "The older magic gets the more set it is in its ways."

"He understands," says Katilda.

Arlinn doesn't have the energy to fight it, when Teferi's already stepping up. "So what do you need from us exactly? Arlinn told us about the ritual." He gestures to the Celestus pieces above them with his staff. "When we find the Moonsilver Key, what's to be done with it?"

"You bring it to the center of the Celestus. Arlinn knows the way," she answers. "I will await you there with the coven. There, we join it with the Sungold Lock, and complete the ritual."

"And do you have any idea where we could find the Key?" Kaya asks. "Any leads, any last known whereabouts . . . ?"

Katilda sighs. "No. It was taken from the Dawnhart Coven centuries ago."

"Right," says Kaya. "Then I guess we'd better start looking. Arlinn, do you have any ideas?"

She's never heard anything about a Moonsilver Key before last night, and all she knows of the Celestus are old legends, but she is sure of one thing. "There's got to be something in Thraben. Might have been the Church that took the Key."

"And if that's the case, I'm sure it's safely hidden away," says Adeline. She nods. "To Thraben, then."

"Uh . . . Are you sure Thraben's all that safe?" says Chandra. "Are you *sure* we have to go there again? Because last time didn't go so great, and it wasn't very safe at all." Adeline casts her a sidelong look, and Chandra quickly adds: "Not that I'm afraid."

Arlinn sighs. "I know what you mean—but the vaults should still be all right."

It's been some time since Arlinn last visited the Cathedral.

She hopes it'll go better than it did then.

# EPISODE III
# The Fall of the House of Bertzold

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ARLINN AND THE GATEWATCH
SEARCH FOR THE MOONSILVER KEY,
THE LAST ITEM THE DAWNHART COVEN NEEDS
TO COMPLETE THE HARVESTTIDE RITUAL
THAT WILL BRING BACK THE LIGHT.

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"So, when you guys said that if the Key was in Thraben, it'd be safe . . . "

The groans of the unhallowed dead answer Chandra before any of the others can. Kaya pinches her nose. Teferi's already stopped up his; he breathes through his mouth, and that's still bad. Despite the midday sun, the clouds come together to cast their shade upon the remains of the Cathedral. Even the sky's ashamed of the sight.

Seeing it sets Arlinn's stomach in knots. There, the spire where she spent sunny hours reading, now rubble scattered against the earth; here, the stained glass she so treasured shattered. To look upon the teeming mass of undead feels like a further betrayal. She doesn't want to think about the odds that she may see someone she used to know.



*"Light Up the Night", by Wei Wei.*

She swallows. As ants around their hill, the zombies around the cathedral. Getting past them will be no easy feat.

"It may well be," Adeline says. "But we won't know until we finish our investigation."

And they had done some investigating, or rather Kaya had. It took them the better part of a week to get to Thraben—plenty of time to look into things. A hunch wasn't enough for her to go on. The second they'd



arrived in Thraben she'd split off from the group to go do some reconnaissance of her own. Wherever she went, she returned not long after with a dusty tome in hand.

"Page seventy-seven," she announced.

Turning to that page showed an illuminated page and woodcut, rendered in great detail: a family being handed a box by a witch who resembled Katilda. The caption labeled them the Bertzolds, from Gavony.

Arlinn knew a Worrin Bertzold from her time at the Cathedral—an older bishop, strict as could be. Her knuckles hurt thinking of him. But her heart did, too, for she knew that if he was anywhere.

Well, he'd be in there. With the masses. And who knows how many of her old friends.

"I think I see him." Adeline's voice cuts through Arlinn's thought. The cathar points with her sheathed sword to the ruined nave of the Cathedral. A figure in holy vestments stands before the pulpit. To Arlinn's horror, he seems to be preaching to a gathered crowd. The pews are full of zombies sitting and clapping and bowing and praying.

What the Travails did to this place is really, truly unholy. Once, Liliana had raised all of these zombies to fight against the Eldrazi. It was bad enough having to share the field with the living dead—but worse dealing

with them afterward. She'd heard that someone asked Liliana what to do about all the remaining zombies. The story went that she replied "They have plenty of uses, you know; try thinking creatively."

Thinking of it weighs her down. This place is an affront to everything she loves. She knows what it once was.

And she knows the vestments the man wears. Wearily, she nods. That's him.

"Nothing for it, then," says Kaya. "Someone's going to have to make a way through."

Adeline pulls herself up onto her horse—a white stallion she's probably named Thunderbolt or Lionshield or something equally heroic. Looking at her astride it, it's hard not to feel some hope.

"You can leave that to me," she says. "My cathars and I have been fighting the undead for years. You four focus on getting to Worrin."

Chandra looks over at the horde, then back to Adeline. "What, and let you do all the fighting? I don't think so," she says. "I've got your back. *You* three make for Worrin." The air's gone hazy around her, heating up in reflection of her grinning enthusiasm. There are no two ways about it—Chandra's going to let loose.



Adeline's smirk returns. "All right. I'll be the vanguard, and you take up the rear, Chandra Nalaar," she says.

A mock salute is the answer. If the situation weren't so dire it might bring a smile to Arlinn's face. As it stands, she can feel a distant happiness that they're getting along well which falls away the moment she eyes the ruined nave.

There's no time to waste.

Adeline and the cathars lead the charge, falling like a holy hammer upon the anvil of the undead. Adeline's commands come swift and certain as does the cut of her blade. Heads fall from bodies like fruit from trees. One leaps upon her, only to slow mid-jump. Blue streaks fly from Teferi's staff as he slows the undead's advance down the central column. It isn't much—only the slightest delay—but it's enough for Adeline to bash the zombie back with her shield and plunge her sword into its throat.

The way won't stay open for long.

Into the hard-won furrow of safety they go, Kaya flickering in and out of existence, Arlinn shifting halfway through. The encroaching arms of the dead taste foul in her mouth; she avoids them whenever possible, slashing at faces, teeth, and feet with the claws that nature's given her. Still, spittle falls on her fur; still, the snarls slither into her ears; still their stench stops her throat.

But it isn't until Chandra takes up the rear that Arlinn feels any kind of safety. Two great sheets of flame fly from her hands, replacing the now-fading walls of Teferi's magic with something far more solid. Even the dead fear fire, as Thalia had shown them all: they scream as one, retreating from the searing heat, widening the gap between the heroes and the undead. Yet she isn't done there—as the others press on, Chandra turns to face the masses, the fire she conjures like the breath of life itself. There were zombies there, once, and now they are ash upon the wind.

Adeline chances a look over her shoulder as Chandra bathes them in orange light, at the pyromancer in the very heart of her element, surrounded by life-saving destruction.

Arlinn doesn't know what Adeline's thinking but she does know her own thoughts: she should never, under any circumstance, upset Chandra Nalaar.

It isn't easy going into the church, but it's easier between fire and sword. The walls rise around them and then fall away, broken by the Travails and twisted into something new. Worrin's wordless groaning grows closer and closer. Flames lick the once-holy walls, and though it hurts, Arlinn hopes it's a sort of cleansing.

"Got him yet?" Chandra shouts. It's hard to hear her over the roar of flame, but Arlinn does. She bolts ahead.



Adeline's got him back up against a wall, idly mouthing prayers he once taught Arlinn. As she shifts back to her human form his rheumy, undead eyes focus once more. When his mouth moves it is to shape her name. He points to her, or perhaps to her flesh. Arlinn wants to believe it's the former.

"Worrin, it's me," Arlinn says. "You recognize me, right?"

"Dennick?" is the answer. She glances over her shoulder—Chandra's closed in with the rest of them. Adeline and the cathars spread in a circle around Arlinn and Worrin.

"Worrin," Arlinn says, forcing herself to sound calm in the face of this aberration she once knew, "We're looking for the Moonsilver Key. Do you know where it is?"

His eyes blink, one after the other. His toothless jaws smack together.

Silence.

The clatter of Adeline's sword against the dead, the rush of the fire. Kaya and Teferi's eyes on her.

"The Key, Worrin," Arlinn says. Angel save her, she sets her hands on his shoulders. He can't look away from her now.

"Dennick," his answer.

"Arlinn, we don't have very long!" Adeline shouts.

*"The Key,"* Arlinn repeats.

"D… Dennick…"

Arlinn curses under her breath. "I think we've gotten all we can from him!"

"Great," says Chandra. "This time, Addy, you watch my back!"

And as the fire takes the cathedral again, Arlinn gives Worrin the only rest she can: a *crack,* a prayer, a hope for the better.

…

You think you know a person, but often you only know one part of them. Worrin in life was as strict an instructor as they came. Arlinn couldn't remember talking to him about anything other than theology, and though his answers were always well-thought-out, she always imagined him as the sort of man who had given up his life to the church. On occasion, he'd bring up his youth in Gavony, but that was as far as it ever got.

But people are rarely so simple, and as they arrive in the quiet Gavony township the Bertzolds called home, they start asking questions.

"Worrin and Dennick?" says one woman, brushing the frost off the pumpkins she's spent all season growing. Old age has not kept her from



tending crops, and her hands move with practiced precision. "Puh. I guess it was about time someone came calling."

Arlinn kneels next to her. "That so? Well, sorry we took so long. Snow slowed us down."

"Ain't enough snow for that," the woman answers. "It's only frost. You're old enough to know better than to use *that* as an excuse."

Arlinn allows herself a small smirk. No matter how many worlds she went to, there's never any place quite like home. "You're right, you're right," she answers. The snow is light—her touch is enough to melt it. "But maybe you can fill me in, anyway."

The old woman fixes Arlinn with a look. "You're too late."

"Too late?" Arlinn repeats, frowning.

"If he wasn't dead before the Travails, he is now," she says. "He holed up in the old family mansion. For safety's sake, he said. Haven't seen him since. Place is *awfully* haunted."

Arlinn looks over her shoulder. The Bertzold home rests on a hill, and she can see its gaping windows from here. "But why go there if it's so haunted?"

The old woman pats her hands clean. "Because Dennick is Worrin's boy."

…

The Travails broke everything in Innistrad, but some things were remade. Steady, desperate hands reworked the warped Avacynian symbols on the road back to their old forms, breaking off the stone in favor of wood, or rough-hewn iron. They pass houses torn asunder and constructed from neighboring pieces, like a stitcher got to them. The people are the same: some bearing their scars on the inside, some simply keeping a closer eye on their children, some clutching prosthetic limbs close as they watch the newcomers roll through town.

Innistrad breaks. Innistrad builds. Innistrad survives.

It's a good thought, but the mansion gives lie to it: the Bertzold home is as dilapidated as they come, and evil to boot. Evil's the word for it, Arlinn's sure—for the way the windows look down on them, the way the vines rake at its stony face, the way its door-mouth hangs open.

Arlinn doesn't like looking at it. But she will.

Of the five of them, it's Kaya who seems the least troubled as they approach the home she shows no signs of fear at all. The yawning door of the mansion doesn't faze her. She looks it up and down, her brows narrowing, and then flicks her nose with her thumb. "So he's in there?"

Arlinn nods.

"With a bunch of malevolent spirits, right?"



"Sure looks like the place for it," says Chandra.

"I've some holy symbols—" Adeline starts, but Kaya waves her off.

"Don't bother," she says. "Just give me five minutes before you follow."

And, true to form, Kaya doesn't bother waiting around for permission. Into the maw of it she goes. Arlinn's nose tingles as the sharp scent of Kaya's magic fills the air, followed by the low hum she's come to associate with it. Adeline heads to one of the broken windows to peer in.



*"Thraben Exorcism", by Matt Stewart.*

Chandra follows, taking up the same window. From their reaction, there's quite a lot to see.

It's hard to resist temptation, sometimes. Bitterly she thinks to herself that Tovolar would say the same. Restraint is as a human thing and not a wild one. Give in to your passions and your instincts, they always know best—that was what he taught her.

The Church taught her otherwise.

She presses her face to the window. Inside, a streak of grayish-white gives rise to Kaya's ghostly form. But it isn't the only ghost present. The old woman was right: the place is *awfully* haunted, but it won't be for long. Kaya's putting them down at an incredible rate. It's hard to follow her form as she jumps from one of the ghosts to the next, here plunging a knife into a back and there slashing at ghostly throats. Arlinn can't help but wonder where the spirits are going afterward if this is the Blessed Sleep coming to take them or something else.

Maybe she'll ask later.

For now, the room's clear of supernatural threats. Chandra's the first one pushing in, Adeline right after, and next Arlinn. Teferi takes up the rear this time. The ghosts don't seem to bother him much; he moves with the same warm ease as ever.

But there's another floor.



Up they go, step by creaking step, breath baited, the hum growing only louder behind the decrepit door. Chandra moves to open the door, but Adeline stops her with a hand on her shoulder.

"Let me," she says. "You're safer behind me."

Had Adeline walked out of a story somewhere? There's the gallantry, yes, but also the way she splinters the door when she throws all her weight against it. Inside, Kaya's leaning casually near one of the ghosts. She greets the others with a sarcastic bow as they charge in.

"Here's your man," she says. "Nice and easy."

Teferi's hum is one of amusement. "That was less than five minutes."

"Rich, coming from you," Kaya answers. "Don't you just make the time up as you go?"

"If only it were that easy," he says. Teferi looks over his shoulder, his smile softening with sympathy. He gestures to the floating ghost—a man no older than thirty, the skeleton pinned beneath a piece of rubble presumably his. They're wearing the same rough-hewn clothes. "After you."

Arlinn doesn't wait. She comes up to him, resisting the urge to shake his hand. "Dennick? My name is Arlinn Kord. I was a friend of your father's."



*"Dennick, Pious Apparition", by Chris Rallis.*

How strange to see a ghost's eyes go wide. "My father? Has he sent for me?"

Always better to give the truth where you can, no matter how ugly. "I can't say he did. Your father's dead. I put him to rest myself, but you should know he was calling out for you to the end."

"Put him to rest?" the ghost twiddles worried fingers. "Does that mean he's...undead?"



"He was," she answers. "It's best not to dwell. But I came to ask after something very important, something your family guards—"

"Oh. This isn't a social call?"

"No, it isn't," Arlinn says. "Please. If you know anything about the Moonsilver Key, Innistrad has need of it. The nights are growing longer; we need it for a ritual to set things right."

"I thought with all the people, maybe it was a social call," Dennick answers. Twiddle, twiddle. "Most people want the Key. I never saw it. I wasn't a real Bertzold, my father said."

"Then he was being a fool about it," Arlinn says. "Here you are at the mansion the same as any Bertzold. And if you could tell us where the key is, well, you'd be doing your family's duty better than any of the others have."

Somehow the ghost sighs. "I guess I am," he answers. "All right. Well . . . I did some digging here, too, because I heard about it and . . . turns out we don't have it. My great-grandfather gave it over to one of the vampires for safekeeping. Isn't that silly?"

Kaya pinches her nose again.

Chandra sucks in a breath. She holds up a finger. "Excuse me, but can I just ask *which* vampire?"

Dennick sighs. “Will you let me rest if I do?”

“If that’s what you’d like,” Arlinn says. “But it’d be easier to rest if you knew Innistrad wasn’t in danger, right?”

He rolls his head as if thinking it over. Then: “It’s the Markovs. That prince of theirs, he took it. Did my father say he missed me?”

“I had the *worst* feeling about that,” Chandra says, halfway to the door, but Arlinn stays behind.

Dennick wants someone to talk to. The least she can do is listen—at least for a little while.

...

Innistrad rebuilds.

Even the vampires.

As much havoc as they’ve caused, as much as her stomach rumbles at the scent, as much as she hates them—Arlinn has to admit there’s something comforting about it. The Travails spared no one. Try as the denizens of the dark might to wipe out humanity, not long ago, they all fought on the same side.

Arlinn hopes they can again.



The others march on ahead. Chandra’s listless; she doesn’t like the idea of walking into the serpent’s den. Kaya doesn’t either. But Arlinn understands something they don’t: this was once a place people found hope. And it is something the others know—but they don’t understand it. Not really. To have such a hunger in your belly and yet act against those bestial instincts for the greater good . . . she doesn’t like Sorin Markov, but she can respect him.

And she can respect the memory of the angel who gave her hope when hope was as furtive as that white stag.

So as the others march on, Arlinn pauses just outside the gates. Vines have claimed the broken halves of an Avacynian symbol. Cutting them apart with her sharp nails, she rights the symbol and starts a prayer.

*“Guard us through the night, O Angel . . . ”*

To her surprise another voice joins in, Adeline’s from the sound of it.

Teferi’s follows, at a slight delay, as he learns the words.

Chandra joins in after, a little too fast, stumbling here and there, but trying her best.

And last—with a bit of a sigh—is Kaya, coming in when they’re nearly done.

When they're finished, they exchange soft smiles, and head in.

No one asks her why she prays to an angel who can no longer hear her.

...

People who say they'll cross bridges when they get to them haven't been to Markov manor. The thin strip of rock leading into the place would be intimidating enough in normal times, standing as it does above the yawning mouth of a chasm, but the Travails have come here too. The bridge floats in pieces. Hopping from piece to piece is the only way to approach the crumbling castle. The broken visages of the elder Markovs make terrible stepping stones.

Inside, it isn't much better. Chalices lay under a coat of dust; pauldrons to beggar a village are only rocks to stumble upon; what portraits are not torn asunder have faded to black. Worse—it does not smell of death here, nor of rot, nor even of blood—it smells of nothing.

"What are the odds no one's home?" Chandra asks.

"Slim to none," says Kaya. "The place is bad, but it's not abandoned bad." She points up at the chandelier over their heads. "Someone's changed the candles."

"Likely a thrall," says Adeline. "But Kaya's right—we have to keep our guard up."



"But what if he's not here? Then we can just steal the Key without having to talk to him."

"Let's hope he isn't," says Arlinn, "but it's best to assume he is. Besides, I'm sure he can be reasoned with."

But as she says that they pass a particular outcropping of rock, one not quite like its neighbors. Where the others are sharp, twisted things—daggers aimed at an unseen foe—this one is an open-wound upon the face of Markov manor. Here the gouges are worse than anywhere else, concentrated in two long furrows on either side. The rim of it is likewise rough, the edges looking uncomfortably like they'd been chewed away. Splotches of dried blood only make the sight more gruesome.

"Don't like the look of that," Adeline says.

"Can't say I do, either," says Teferi.

Kaya makes a small sound. Her eyes narrow. "Can't have teeth anymore, whatever it was."

"Sorin will know what happened. Maybe we aren't the only ones after the Key," says Arlinn.

"If he's even here," Chandra says.

But he is. He has to be. After all this, to have him elude them, Arlinn grits her teeth. She's going to find that Key one way or another. Tovolar wants to tear Innistrad's heart from its chest; she can't let that happen.

"If he's anywhere, it's the throne room," Arlinn says.

"Should be up ahead," says Kaya. "All the portraits down this hall, it can't lead anywhere *but* the throne room."

She has a point. There aren't many images left, but there are *enough*. To say nothing of the gate up ahead of them: a large, looming thing, carved with the snarling faces of bats, now thrown partially off its hinges. When they get to it, it takes Arlinn shifting to her wolf form to throw the doors open. Adeline eyes her as she shifts back. Arlinn offers her a friendly smile.

"Don't worry, I'm housebroken," she says. Joking about it sometimes sets people at ease even if these days she's not sure how accurate it is to say. Back in the woods, she'd come so close to running off.

But she's Arlinn today, and she plans to stay that way—even when, in the dusty throne room, they find the prince awaiting them.

Sorin Markov sits with one leg slung over the broken throne of his house. He's reading an old unmarked book, something like a journal. A hole in the ceiling casts a single ray of moonlight upon his gray skin. Surrounded by the empty splendor of the abandoned manor he makes for a strange sight.



Though he doesn't look up at them as they enter, Arlinn can smell the resentment coming off him. His voice is forceful and arrogant. "State your purpose for disturbing me now, or I shall see all of you out."

"Sorin," says Teferi. Of course it's him stepping forth, of course he shows no signs of intimidation. The court bow he manages would put any aristocrat to shame. "A pleasure to see you again. We just have a small business matter to attend to. We'll keep it brief."

The vampire glances up over the edge of his book. "I know better than to put any faith in your definition of brief. The reason, now."

Teferi's shoulders rise in a shrug, as if to say he tried. "We're looking for the Moonsilver Key. The nights are growing—"

Sorin snaps the book shut. "No."

"What do you mean, *no?*" says Chandra. "We've spent forever looking for it. The least you could do is hear us out."

His eyes fix on hers. Chandra stops talking. There's something predatory about the man, and yet something enchanting, too. Arlinn's met plenty of bloodsuckers in her time, but none quite like him. It was like the difference between dogs and wolves.

And yes, there is something carnivorous to the way he stands, the way he casts the book aside, the steps he takes, and the posture he assumes—his hand resting just so on the pommel of his sword. "I cannot expect someone so *impetuous* to understand how much I've sacrificed for this plane already. If my *family,"* he practically snarls the word, "so wishes to descend into the worthless hedonism of eternal night, then I have done enough to stop them. Let them feast."

Teferi holds up his hands, standing just in front of Chandra. "If you won't listen to her, listen to me. This plane's your family, Sorin, we all know that. You've done *more* than enough. We're asking for the Key so we can do our part. Arlinn here doesn't want to see eternal night any more than you do."

"Is that so?" he answers. "Pray tell me what you've done for the plane. Go on, I'm listening." Now he's advancing, now the sword slips from its sheath, now the beast in Arlinn's blood calls for her to change.

But she doesn't. Not yet. She plants her heels onto the stony ground. "Maybe I don't have your history, but the past few years I've been traveling the place, listening to people. I thought you'd understand better than anyone why humans need to live. You made Ava—"

She's not through the name before the sword's swinging through the air. It's only her own preternatural reflexes that keep her from harm—



she raises an arm to parry the flat of the blade. Still, steel bites into flesh; a streak of red paints the floor; black vapor stings her eyes. Teeth grow longer in her mouth. Those golden eyes are burning in the dark.

*"You,"* he rumbles, "aren't permitted to speak of her."

"Have you already forgotten why you made her?" she says. Chandra's already got fires burning; she signals Arlinn over his shoulder. All it would take is a word for the other four to descend on him, but she doesn't want that. Not yet. "We need angels. We need hope, we need faith. We need the day—and we need the Key."

"Get out," he shouts. The empty walls turn it into a vicious echo. *"Now."*

"Not without the Key," Arlinn answers, just as firm. "Maybe you've forgotten but I haven't."

Up the sword, another strike coming as his anger gets the better of him. Arlinn raises her arm again.

But there's no need to. A feather falls between them, gold and glowing, followed an instant later by a heron-headed scythe. Sorin's sword clatters against the angelic weapon; he draws back in naked fury to behold the interloper.

And it may be the middle of the night, it may be a cold, dark time, it may be the beginning of the end of Innistrad, but the golden light that



*"Sigarda, Champion of Light", by Howard Lyon.*

floods into the throne room brings with it a swell of hope to Arlinn's breath. So, too, does the holy fervor of the angel before her.

Avacyn may no longer hear prayers.

But Sigarda does.

"Sorin Markov," she says. Her voice is resonant, with a slight echo that casts it as more than human. "How far you've fallen. Carving your way out of the stone only to sulk."

That pit—that was *him?* How strange, to feel pity for a centuries-old vampire prince.



Stranger still when that same man levels his blade at an angel. "What would you have me do? Since you clearly have all the answers. Go on, explain. Either that or throw your lot in with them and get out of here."

Sigarda's golden eyes narrow. She does not avert them from Sorin, yet when she speaks it feels as if she's at Arlinn's side. "Arlinn Kord—it is your faith that summoned me here. The cause in your heart is just. You will find the Moonsilver Key in Sorin's personal chambers on the third floor. Go. I mean to speak to him about his old creation."

Chandra and Kaya don't need to be told twice—they bolt off for the staircase. "Thanks, Sigarda!" shouts Chandra, feet against the plush carpets. Teferi is soon after, stopping only long enough to offer a respectful bow.

But Arlinn and Adeline remain, even as Sigarda brings the scythe down upon him, even as his features become more bestial in the face of danger. A certain holy dread has pinned them to the spot. Is it not the place of the faithful to aid their idols? The two exchange a look. Adeline raises her shield.

*"Go!"* cries the angel, Sorin's sword slicing at her armor. "If you ever had any faith in me, you will go!"

Arlinn swallows. She wants to help. Adeline squeezes her arm. "We'd only get in the way," she mumbles, as dejected as Arlinn feels.

And maybe she's right.

But it doesn't make it feel any better.

Up the stairs Arlinn goes, following in Adeline's footsteps, trying not to pay attention to the howls of pain that follow, trying not to count how many belong to the angel and how many to the vampire. That is, in and of itself, faith.

It is Chandra who finds the room—festooned with bookshelves and antique weapons—and Teferi who finds the Moonsilver Key. It sits in the offering hands of a statue. Sorin must have lopped the head off of it, but the armor and the wings leave little doubt who it used to be. The Headless Avacyn sits beneath a portrait of a young Sorin and his grandfather dressed in their finest.

Arlinn takes the Key.

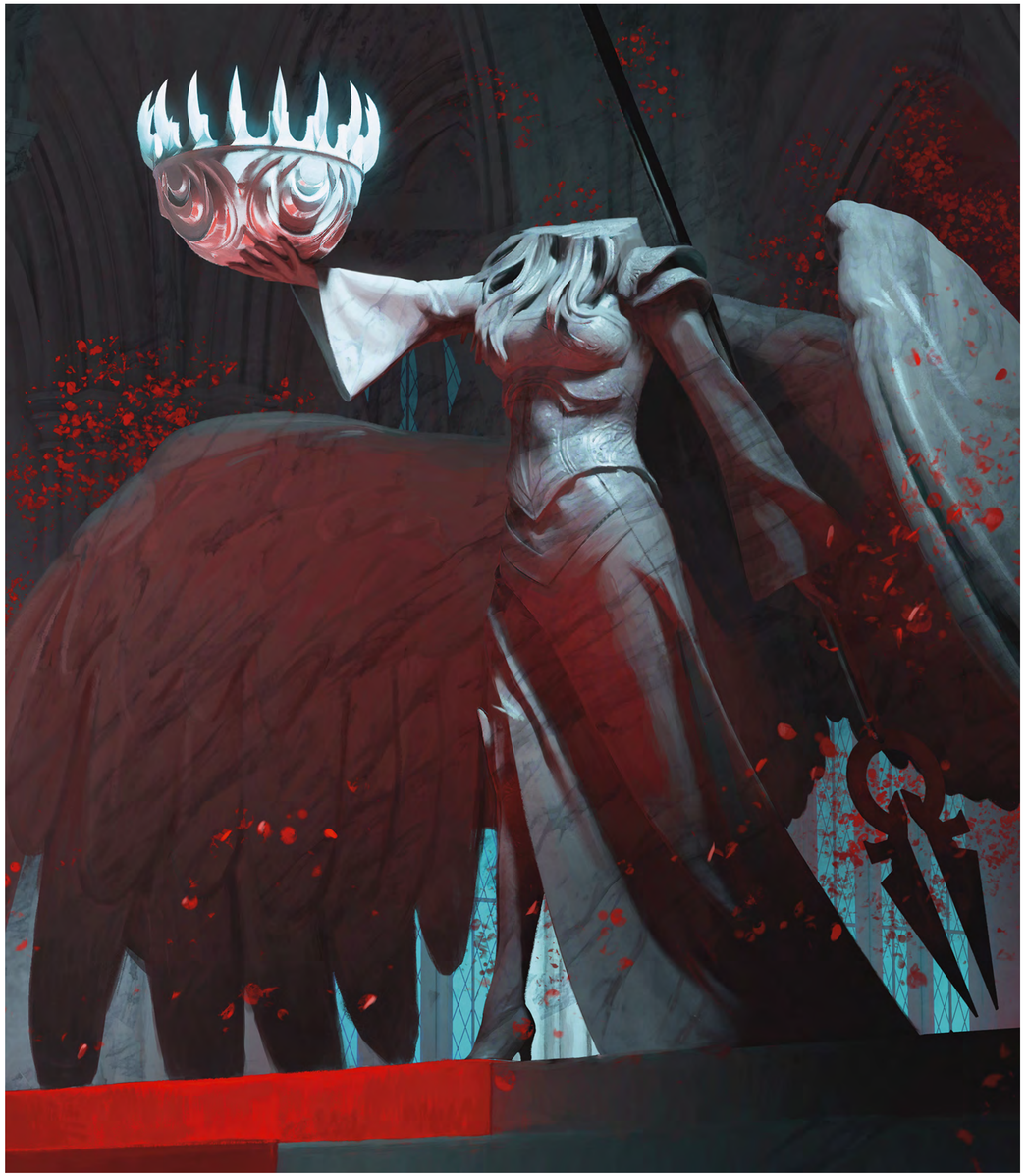
For the second time that day, she mutters a prayer.

This time, she prays that Sigarda will be safe and that they will make it back in time for Harvesttide.

But it is a strange thing to pray to an angel for their own safety, and stranger still to ask them to warp time.

Nothing is guaranteed in Innistrad—but they will try to survive, try to endure, and look once more to the holy light of day.





*"Moonsilver Key", by Joseph Meehan.*

# EPISODE IV
# Harvesttide

ARLINN RETURNS TO THE HARVESTTIDE FESTIVAL ONLY TO FIND IT UNDER ATTACK. AS THE GATEWATCH ENGAGE THE RAMPAGING WEREWOLVES, ARLINN HUNTS DOWN TOVOLAR.

Three knocks on Olivia Voldaren's door put her in a killing mood. Not that she's ever not in a killing mood, of course, but sometimes people take it upon themselves to exacerbate matters, and what is she to do then? You simply can't tolerate these things; it breeds rebelliousness in your servants. And not the fun kind.

"Come in, and do make it worth my time," she calls. "I cannot *bear* to have my beauty rest interrupted."

She does not open her eyes, for if she does it'll throw the whole thing off. It took her a whole fifteen minutes to flay the face off of that maiden; Olivia isn't going to let it go to waste. You have to give the blood time to settle in and really lend you color.

"My most illustrious and powerful Lady Olivia Voldaren."

Her lips quirk into a small smile. Yes. Good.

". . . I come bearing news of the humans."

Her smile and good mood, gone. She scowls, careful not to upset the maiden's face overlaid on her own. "Is this *important* news?"

"I think so," says the messenger. From the sound of his voice, it was probably Feuer. Didn't he have some bones he should be reassembling?



*"Sunset Revelry", by Antonio José Manzanedo.*



Olivia never met a finer purveyor of ossuary furniture, but why was he *here?* "They're up to something. Trying to restore the balance of day and night, I believe."

She starts to groan and then stops herself. Mustn't disturb the mask, Olivia, it was such a pain to extract. "And how do you believe they mean to do this?" she says. "Isn't as if they can throw a chain around the sun."

"Most illustrious and powerful Lady Voldaren, I believe they're doing it with a festival."

"A festival."

"Yes, a festival," he repeats, firm even after her disbelief. "I was of late visiting Gavony in pursuit of certain physical resources—"

Why won't he just say bones?

"—when I came across the strangest sights: vampire effigies. Large, abominably decorated versions of ourselves, and even of your vaunted, ineffable personage."

"*My* personage? That cannot stand."

"So it cannot, my most illustrious and powerful Lady Voldaren, so it cannot. In my clever guise as a wandering sword-for-hire, I asked what

the preparations were for. A kind woman told me they were for Harvesttide. Thanking her, I killed her where she stood and burned the effigy."

Olivia frowns. "You burned it? Feuer, have some common sense, you should have brought it back here. We could have used it for the reception."

There's the slightest tremor of fear in his voice. "Very well, my most illustrious and powerful Lady Voldaren, it shall be so next time," he says. He clears his throat. "But it may further interest you to hear the method. As I was excavating a specimen I caught sight of a group of travelers—they seemed outsiders, but I recognized their leader. Arlinn Kord—"

"Ugh. That mongrel."

"The very same. She is leading the search. In addition, there was a woman with burning hair—"

Olivia sighs dramatically.

"—who kept asking after something called the Moonsilver Key. She wanted to get a good look at it, which tells me they already had it."

Ahh, that old thing. The humans must be desperate if they're digging it back up. Olivia sits up. "Harvesttide, is it?"

"Harvesttide, indeed. What shall be done? Shall I speak with our other extraction specialists?"



Olivia touches a knuckle to her lips in thought and consequentially the young maiden's, too. "No need. Let it proceed."

"But Lady Voldaren—"

"Most illustrious and powerful Lady Voldaren," she corrects. "Feuer, if you saw someone extracting a specimen you coveted, what would you do?"

He hums in thought. "I would kill them."

He isn't playing along at all. "Yes. Obviously. But *when* would you kill them?"

"Immediately," he answers. "It'd be a personal affront."

Olivia laughs. "That's where you're thinking too small, dear little boy," she says. At last, she slides the mask off her skin, rubbing the blood into her thirsty skin. "*Never* interrupt someone when they're doing your work for you."

...

Among the gathered festival-goers, a single thought: Innistrad must endure.

From all walks of life, they have come to this place from the nearby foothills of Kessig, from the storied spires and murky moors of Gavony, from the ports and tunnels of Nephalia, from the sunless streets and twist-

ed towers of Stensia, they have come. Beneath the never-turning arms of the ancient Celestus they march their effigies, their candles, their baskets of short-lived flowers, and fruits.

Innistrad must endure. This *cannot* be the last time.

So says the pumpkin carver with a gathered crowd of children before them. "What can I make for you?" they ask, and the children say they would like to see the sun. A sun, then, a sun—the pumpkin carver's hands move with grace and hope and joy. The guts are already hollowed, they explain, and that's the importance of preparation at a time like this, you have to be able to think ahead. Make sure to pay attention to your tutors and they'll tell you the same. Here are the rays, and here is the sun—chunks of pumpkin falling onto the frost-laced earth. A candle in the center. The pumpkin carver, a witch themself, calls down a candle from one of those floating overhead.

"Make a wish," says the pumpkin carver to the child. "It can be for whatever you want, as big as you like."

And the child, of course, wishes that the sun will go on forever, but she does not tell the witch this. If you speak your wishes they won't come true.

The witch tells the girl to touch the candlewax. A sun and moon engrave themselves on the spot the girl picks, and she draws in a gasp, and the witch smiles. Into the pumpkin, it goes. They hand the girl the finished work.



"Here," they say. "A sun just for you, one that will never go out. Happy Harvesttide!"

And the girl skitters off, carrying her personal sun, thinking that the world is a little brighter. So it is.

Especially when everyone else wants their own personal sun now.

Witch Deidamia watches the girl go and says to themself: this is why Innistrad must endure, this is why it cannot be the last time.

Katilda said it won't be.

Looking up at the Celestus, Deidamia has to hope that's the truth and they have to nurture that hope, too, have to keep it alight just like the candles.

Even if it's just to amuse these children.

A light frost falls on the proceedings. Only a few yards away, their fellow witches lead defiant songs, coaxing the melodies out from halting voices. Two booths down from Deidamia, their friend Shana holds up a mug of spiced cider. The festival might have a dour cast, and they may well all die in a few months if the sun isn't put back in its proper place but for now, there is the joy of spiced cider.

Deidamia nods. Shana whispers a quick spell and sends the cup floating onto Deidamia's table, where they take a quick sip in the middle

of carving another sun. Shana's eyes say she wants to talk more about what's going on, about how long they're supposed to wait before putting on their masks, but Katilda was clear: wait for the Key. Until then, keep your eyes open, and keep the festival-goers safe.

And so Deidamia scans the crowd, and the trees, and minds their wards, all as they continue to trap the sun for the children. And, too, for the weary faces of the parents standing behind them.

It is not Deidamia who spots the heroes first, but Shana. Her excited shout gives way to cheers from all around. The bards switch to an upbeat, triumphant tune to welcome them. The crowd goes so thick that Deidamia cannot even really see the heroes, who have arrived at the other end of the festival but she sees an exciting gout of flame rise. There was a pyromancer among them, wasn't there?

The boy awaiting his own personal sun shouts for Deidamia to hurry, and so they do—the moment the pumpkin touches the counter the boy is off to see the heroes. So, too, is the rest of the crowd gone. For the first time all festival, there's an empty table before them.

Shana's table is empty, too. Deidamia can't resist a look at the heroes on their way to the center of the Celestus—a little more cider won't hurt. And Shana will understand, right?



They take a few steps over and pour themselves a new glass and it is then, as the scent of apples fills the air, that Deidamia feels the too-sharp pain of a ward going down.

The howling starts soon after.

...

Maybe it was all the apples. Maybe it was all the spices. Maybe it was all the pumpkins. Or maybe it was the collected scent of thousands of humans gathering to stare down their deaths.

Whatever the case, Arlinn doesn't smell them coming.

She doesn't know it's happening until it's too late, doesn't see them beating against the barriers until the shaman-wolves are already upon them, doesn't hear the howling until they're already at the gates. Grateful cheers screech into fearful screams; the children gathered to see them soon return to their mothers' sides.

Witches shout, too, donning their wood and bone masks, directing the crowds further into the imposing arms of the Celestus. "It isn't safe here—you have to go!"

And for the most part the people listen, becoming a great river of flesh and fear, rushing over the carefully arranged booths and tables, trampling underfoot pumpkins and elders and bottles of cider. Is it blood or

wine that soaks the Kessig earth? Who can say? All that matters is that the wolves are at the door, and the Celestus is away from them.

Arlinn can see them now: the Howlpack shamans standing among the trees, cloaked in the dyed furs of their kills, the dull scarlet glow of their magic getting brighter and brighter as they chant their spells; the quickest of them running in hungry circles around the edge of the barricade; impossibly large bruisers looming in final threat; wolves in tough, leathered armor.



*"Storm the Festival", by Yigit Koroglu.*



She can see all of them and there must be hundreds.

Her chest goes tight.

"Arlinn," says Kaya. "We're in it deep, aren't we?"

"Not as long as we can save the humans," Arlinn says. Her voice comes out more strained than she'd like. Shouldn't a leader sound more confident? "Kaya, take the Key. Make sure it gets to Katilda."

"Got it," she says. Kaya doesn't need to be told twice—the second Teferi hands her the Key, she's off, fading into the mist. Good, the wolves won't be able to find her.

There's a lump fast forming in Arlinn's throat, but she doesn't have time for that now. Red light's painting the stark fear of the crowd in horrific shadow. A lycanthrope only a little smaller than a siege tower beats a fist against the edge of the magical barrier.

*Crack.*

Arlinn cannot tear her eyes from the horde—from the wolves pacing along with the lycanthropes. If she looks long enough she is sure to see familiar faces, and the thought fills her with dread. "Chandra, Adeline—"

"You don't need to tell us," says Chandra.

And indeed she doesn't. Adeline, already mounted, throws out a hand for Chandra and helps her into the saddle. The two of them are off to the forefront without another word.

To be in all things a protector and guiding light: that is the core of faith that drives Arlinn forward. And there's no better time to be a protector than this.

So why is it that part of her longs to join them? Why is it that her wild heartbeats in her breast, straining against her careful control?

Her gaze soon falls on the answer.

He's here.

*Crack. Crack. Crack.*

Overhead, the magic shatters like stained glass; she looks up at it with blood soaking her vestments and tears streaking down her cheeks.

A wave against the rocks of Nephalia; the wall of werewolves falling upon the straggling festival-goers. Blood spraying in the air, bones crunching beneath the massive jaws of transformed death, a howl that sets her alight with self-loathing and hunger.

"Arlinn."



The beating of war drums in her ear nearly drowns out Teferi's voice next to her but his hand squeezing her shoulder brings her back. She shakes her head, presses her eyes together. "Teferi, I have to—there are people I need to—"

"I know," he says. And he sounds afraid, too, but there's a bravery to his voice that lends her some of the same. "I was going to tell you I owed you a long sunset."

She narrows her eyes, but he's already planting his staff in the earth, already giving her a smile that speaks of confidence he's kindled deep within. "Witches of the Dawnheart Coven!" he bellows, "Let's get this ritual started!"

The second his staff hits the earth a shockwave spreads and every muscle in Teferi's body goes stiff with effort. This time, when he looks at her, she knows she can't waste this borrowed time.

Her dreams are dying by the second as are the last rays of the last sunset on Innistrad.

She has to do what she can.

...

Adeline's a natural leader.

Running through the makeshift battle lines Arlinn sees this clearer than ever: the gathered guards heed her orders as naturally as breathing. Clusters of cathars stand back to back with spears and shields, driving their weapons into the powerful chests of the wolves. When she commands them to hold they fall back, forming a shield wall behind which the few remaining festival-goers can hide.

Tovolar gives no such orders. He has no need to, Arlinn knows well; he is here for the wild hunt, a thing which knows no law. To run with him is to listen to the wild song of your own heart and to follow it to its natural end. She learned that hunting with him. People thought he was quiet because he was mute, but the truth was that he's always been happy to let nature run its course.

And run its course it does—here faster than ever. The orders Adeline's shouting, the gouts of fire from Chandra's gauntlets, the impossible golden rays of the sun: without these things the humans would stand no chance. Even in their human forms, the lycanthropes are too strong to fight back; even in their human forms, the Dires are taller than any blacksmith and wider besides. In some sense it's a blessing that the majority have yet to change: it is one thing to deal with weapons swung by too-strong arms, and another entirely to deal with living walls of muscle.



But that is not to say it's easy. To her right a Dire brings down his hammer upon a cathar shield wall, leaving three men flat on their backs. Again, and again, and again he brings it down; the cathars grunt in pain and effort, curling up as much of themselves beneath their shields as they can.

It is only a curious stuttering that keeps them alive. One of the rare niceties of Arlinn's childhood were the visits from a traveling merchant. Among his stock was a sort of paper lantern with slits cut into the sides. In the center, a mounted cathar. You could spin the lantern and "see" the cathar ride. Not magic, he swore, simply a trick of the light. Arlinn wanted one desperately but knew her parents could never afford it. The strange movements of the cathar beguiled her, the motions stop-and-start.

The Dire is moving much the same way. Raising his hammer overhead, bringing it down—there are precious seconds throughout where he stops moving entirely. Enough for the fallen cathars to wriggle a little out of the way. Even the Dire's shadow doesn't match his movements.

Teferi. She has to thank him after this.

Out of reflex Arlinn calls for her wolves but they won't answer, she knows; there are too many wolves among the attackers. Nature's chosen its side.

So she'll choose humanity's.



*"Borrowed Time", by Andreas Zafiratos.*

Scooping up a fallen cathar's mace she throws herself at the Dire. Muscles can lend you all the power they want but joints will always be weak. He's too busy wailing on his would-be victims to notice the mace coming for the back of his knee. She puts her weight into the blow; a howl and crunch are her rewards. The Dire falters, turns and the cathars stand behind him.

The Dire's snarling. Human though his shape may be, the eyes give him away; they're half-changed already, along with his too-long fangs. "You. Tovolar's *favorite*."



Arlinn scowls. "You don't know anything about me," she answers, hefting the mace. "Get out of here while you can. This isn't a battle you're going to win."

His laugh rumbles out from within his massive chest and distracts him from the coming swords of the cathars. The first through his leg does not stagger him, but the second in his already injured knees sends him howling. The third, between his ribs, bows him but not before he grabs the too-close head of the third cathar in his massive hands.

Arlinn doesn't wait.

The mace meets bone.

Standing in the aftermath, blood on her hands, all she can do is mutter a prayer. When the cathars thank her it does not feel as if she's done anything just, as if she's done anything right.

None of this is right.

*Tovolar's favorite.*

She runs, further into the melee.

She runs because it's wrong and she knows it's wrong—she's never been his favorite, and how could she be? When after two years under his tutelage she left him scarred and bleeding, then ran away in the middle of the night?

She runs from the memory, but memory is a fine hunter: the blood beneath her feet is just like his blood that night; the screams of the festival-goers are like the screams of the Kessiger foresters; the blood on her hands has never truly gone away.

"Can't we be more than this?" she'd asked him.

But to him, this is what they were, what she was, what she was always meant to be.

Nothing more than this: blood on the earth, the taste of meat, the scent of fear.

Arlinn swallows. The bodies she sees—the people she sees—they're just like the foresters.

And there's Tovolar again. Amid the chaos of the raid, he stands still. Brighter his eyes than the fires now set to the forest and focused straight on her.

"Tovolar!" she shouts. "Call this off!"

He smirks, shakes his head. "No."

The mace still in hand she marches. Behind her, the chaos continues: cathars slicing at the throats of lycanthropes; witches sheltering the out-





*"Tovolar, the Midnight Scourge", by Chris Rahn.*

liers; armored raiders standing tall in the face of their opposition. Chandra's fires cast the scene in an amber glow.

"It's almost sundown, Arlinn. There's still time to join," he says. He takes no notice of the weapon in her hand or else it does not frighten him.

But it should.

With a deep, guttural growl, she swings.

Tovolar catches the head of the mace.

"Why would I ever want to join you?" she snarls. More and more of her weight she presses into the mace but he holds it with little trouble.

"You did once," he answers. He pushes the mace back, throwing her off balance. "That was your place."

"You don't get to decide my *place,*" she says. Another swing of the mace finds him catching it by the haft and tearing it from her hands. As it falls it clatters against the shield of a fallen guard but Tovolar takes no notice.

The sun's sinking lower in the sky. Even Teferi can't hold out forever.

He stares at her, and she stares at him.

"They only like you because they think you're like them," he says. "But I know you aren't."

"You don't know me," she shoots back.

And this time, he's the one who comes at her—a big overhand swipe of his claws. Arlinn ducks out of the way only for him to pull her closer, to bare the edge of the scars running from his shoulder to his waist. "Are you sure?"

"I am," she says, just before her fist connects with his jaw. The shock of impact up her arm is more than worth it when she sees the smug look



on his face shrink away. She follows it with another, and another, leaving him staggering back. "Call this off, Tovolar. There's still time."

Blood drips into his teeth. He spits onto the earth. "You're joking."

"I'm not," she says. "Call this off. Let us finish the ritual. Take the nights back, hunt what you can, but leave the humans out of this."

"And how do you think they'd take that?" he says, standing.

"They'd be alive," she answers. "That's what matters."

He comes for her again. This time, she's ready. Arlinn catches both of his fists in her open hands. Her muscles groan with the effort of keeping him at bay, but she digs in her heels—this can't continue.

"See how far that gets you. Your wolves know the truth—it's us versus them. Always has been."

She knows the howls that follow. She knows the growls, knows what she will see if she tears her eyes from his. So she doesn't look, can't bear to; her chest aches enough already with her heart torn out. To see them will only send it rolling around her stomach.

And she can't afford distractions. Squeezing her eyes shut she bashes her forehead into his nose. He staggers long enough for her to get in another punch.

But the ripple that flows across his body tells her what she dreads to hear: time's running out. Tovolar's bloodied teeth grow longer and longer, his grin all the more discomforting when it's on a muzzle. All around them the howls of the others giving in stoke the chaos of the moment.

"Arlinn! Going to need some help!"

Chandra's voice is easy to pick out. The answer less so. Staring Tovolar down the most she can offer is, "Working on it, focus on keeping everyone safe!"

Taller and taller he grows. Her own body fights against her control; her teeth ache, her hands tremble with unspent energy as she scrambles for another weapon. The sword clutched in a fallen guard's hand serves well. Later she'll say a prayer for him.

But for now?

Better to live.

There's joy in him as he lunges for her, there's delight in the swipes he makes—all wild and reckless. Each she meets with the flat of her blade. Quick as he is in this form the best she can do is fend him off and it isn't long before her arm's aching, her shoulder, her back, her tired, tired soul. A faltering guard leaves her open: his claws tear open her cheek. The smell



of blood almost overrides the pain; her nostrils flare, she tastes copper; a deep, primal hunger threatens to overwhelm her carefully won control.

But it doesn't.

"You're a wolf, Arlinn," he snarls, the words mangled by the inhuman shape of his mouth. "No matter how hard you keep trying to pretend!"

"I never said I wasn't!" she answers.

He's on her again, pouncing; she just barely makes it out of his reach. "Then show me!"

He rears up, the scar she gave him now plainly visible even in the fading light. Seeing it puts her in that place again: Tovolar urging her to kill humans again, to prove she was one of them; an impossible choice; an easy and messy solution. All she had to do was kill him, wasn't it? And then she'd be the alpha of the Howlpack.

But things didn't go that way. He didn't die, and she didn't win. They both had the scars to prove it.

Hers are burning. All of her is. In the din of battle, she can hear the drums that played that night, when she challenged him. Just as then the eyes of the pack are upon her, just as then she stands alone and friendless. Just as then, she is right, and he is woefully misguided.

A spasm shakes her arm, the muscles straining to be something more, but she clutches it with her free hand. A prayer drops from her lips. If she's to do this—if she's to show him how wrong he is—then she cannot give in. She cannot allow herself to—

"Give in. Why are you holding back?"

"Because-Because there's still . . . "

The words don't come. It's getting hard to speak. Here, again, the howls: *I am with you, join the hunt.* Here, again, the call of meat and bone; here, again, the finest freedom she's ever known. So close. So close.

She presses her eyes shut. Sense comes to her and she opens them only a moment later, but by then the wolves have closed in.

Streak, Patience, Redtooth, and Boulder.

All staring back at her, all with their teeth bared—except Patience.

She presses herself against Arlinn's leg, tugs on her trousers, looks up at her, and begs: *Be with us. Join the hunt.*

If Tovolar tore her in two, it would hurt less than this. For how can she convey what joining the hunt means? How can she explain to Patience that the humans who look on them with such suspicion are good and the wolves who run and hunt and play with them are in the wrong here?



She staggers. Tears sting her eyes. "I can't," she creaks.

And that is all Boulder needs to hear. True to his name, when he throws his weight against her, she's bowled over, the air gone from her lungs as her ribs crack. Facedown in the muck she can only hear the approach of her wolves, can only feel Tovolar's hands grip her hair.

"We settle this right," he says, "or you die here."

His knee's on her back, his claws at her throat. Even to breathe is to risk injury.

"Show me the real Arlinn. We all want to see her."

Is that what he wants, then?

She'll give it to him.

Not because he's asking for it, not because her wolves are desperate to see it, not because she wants to prove something.

But because in some ways he's right—the two of them are wolves, and she sees now that it was only ever going to end like this.

By blood, and fang, and claw.

The sun sinks below the horizon. Day changes to night.

And Arlinn Kord changes with it.



*“Arlinn, the Moon’s Fury”, by Anna Steinbauer.*

# EPISODE V
# Night Closes Round

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ARLINN DRIVES TOVOLAR AWAY,
AND THE SURVIVORS BEGIN THE HARVESTTIDE RITUAL –
ONLY TO BE INTERRUPTED BY ANOTHER DEADLY FOE.
CAN INNISTRAD SURVIVE THIS ETERNAL NIGHT?

---

*"Mind yourself in the woods, Arlinn," he says.*

*Her father's voice is strong and firm, but there's a bit of a creak to it—like an oak whose branches yawn under pressure. There he stands in his workshop—she can see it so clearly now—surrounded by the work of his own two hands. Holy symbols flood the walls like moths covering a lantern. He does not look up at her.*

When she blinks he is gone.

*Years later, and after traveling the Multiverse, she's finally grown brave enough to go back home. Boulder and Streak know the weight of what she means to do. And, of course, if her human parents reject her, at least she*

*has her pack. Their presence is constant, their loyalty hard-won. She offers them guidance and they offer her belonging. There's strength in that.*

*So she makes her way up the hill to the old forge.*

*But there isn't anything there. A husk meets her: blackened foundations jutting from the earth. A wall that she once scribbled on as a child.*

*The villagers don't recognize her, so they're leery of telling her what happened, but she finds out eventually.*



*"Duel for Dominance", by Ryan Pancoast.*



*A fire. Must have been some accident with the forge. The whole house went up in flame. What a shame—can't be helped.*

She blinks. Back to the present.

Tovolar's before her. No matter how much his shape changes his eyes stay the same: burning, quick, bright as brands. He bares his teeth. A smile, she thinks.

This isn't the first time. There was another years ago, when they met in a semi-circle of their brethren. She tried and failed to kill him; he tried and failed to keep her. He wore the white stag's pelt. The fight ruined it she remembers, vaguely, tearing it from his shoulders in a fit of rage. She was angry then, too.

But not as angry as she is now.

Arlinn Kord's only thought is to wipe the smile from Tovolar's face.

Forward. Powerful legs send her flying through the air; her jaws are ready to clamp down on his throat. Instead, they meet a forearm raised just in time. Blood fills her mouth all the same—thick and rich with copper. Her nostrils flare even as Tovolar twists, using her momentum to send her to the ground.

But you cannot keep a hungry wolf down for long. The moment her back paws hit the earth she's already back up, already lurching toward him again.

He spreads his arms wide. The scar across his chest carries to this form, too. When she blinks, there is no white in his fur, and the wound is bleeding red, red, red.

"Come home," he says.

Was that what he said then?

It doesn't matter.

A howl leaves her throat. She goes for him again, clawing at him, the muscles in her chest and arms straining.

He doesn't move. Claws rend fur and flesh, tearing him open anew, and still, he does not stop smiling. How?

There's no time to dwell; he's on her now, lunging at her waist. Her ribs groan, threatening to crack; he's not letting go any time soon. She plants her feet deeper in the ground. If he wants to lift her he's going to have to give up a lot to do it; from here she can rain down blows on his back. Blood runs in rivers down his fur, each new wound driving her further into the pit of the wilderness.

Yet just as he can't stop her, she can't stop him. Only three blows land before he hefts her overhead and drives her into a split tree trunk. Candles fly, sent tumbling by the impact; fire licks at the gashes the wood's now torn open.



He's a fool if he thinks this can hold her. No matter the chunk of wood buried in her shoulder. Arlinn plants her feet along one corner of the trunk and her shoulders along with the other. A grunt gives her enough power to break her way out. She tears the wood from her shoulder and plunges it straight into Tovolar's leg.

This, at last, succeeds in wiping the smile away. A great howl fills the festival ground—a howl that pierces through the chaos of the battle. When he clutches the wood in his enormous hand, it is with a trembling grip; with some small satisfaction, the Beast of Arlinn Kord realizes she has pierced him all the way through.

Victory's short-lived. Teeth sink into her shoulders, weight pulling her down, there are too many things at once to keep track of. Down she goes—her head cracking against the discarded helmet of a dead guard. Her ears ring. For a moment she can hear nothing—not the screaming of the fleeing festival-goers, not Adeline's shouted orders, not the roar of Chandra's flames.

And not the snarling of the wolves looming over her.

How familiar their faces! How often she's seen them in the middle of a hunt! There is Redtooth, living up to her name, hackles raised; there is Boulder at her feet; there is Streak with his jaws firmly locked on her

already wounded shoulder. Muzzles she's so often seen at play now bear down on her with a predator's frightful presence.

And then Tovolar is over her again.

She tries to stand. Dizziness sends her reeling back, followed shortly by her shoulder threatening to tear. Nausea stops up her throat.

His mouth's moving. She can't hear what he's saying—the ringing in her ears sounds too much like church bells.

What a strange church this is, with screams for hymns and battlefield filth for incense.

She closes her eyes.

The Grand Cathedral in Thraben. Worrin behind a desk. *The world was born in darkness, and to the darkness it longs to return. It is for that reason we must each tend to our own light.*

He was the one who recommended her for the Archmagi.

What would he make of her now? Did his geist know, when he saw her?

Ringing dies down. Tovolar's talking, she can hear him as if from another room, but more than that she can hear her wolves. That low growl they usually directed toward their next meal.



But it isn't quite that growl, is it?

She opens her eyes again.

There he is, pulling the hunk of wood from his leg. Blood drips onto her muzzle.

"Home. . ."

This isn't home.

She tries to sit up again, tries to headbutt him, but Boulder's teeth clamp down and he pushes her back.

"Don't have to fight," he says.

Angel's mercy, she wants to vomit. Her tongue's lead in her muzzle. Hard enough to understand wolf-speech without a head injury.

"Join the hunt," he says. "This is who you are. Don't you understand? You don't have to hide anymore."

Now he's extending a paw to her. Everything in her wants to slap it away. All it does is show her he *can* control himself, but chooses not to. That's how he manages to talk in this shape.

"The Church hates this part of you," he says. "But I don't. The pack doesn't."

And it is then—perhaps by divine providence—that Arlinn realizes something.

Patience isn't with her packmates.

Arlinn swallows back bile. If she tries . . . yes, she can smell that Patience is close by. The scent is faint compared to the blood and sweat at the forefront, but it's there. Her eyes are still spinning but if she tries she can focus and—

There. In the dying light of day, Patience is waiting for her. She sits away from the others, just out of reach of Arlinn's right hand, but the moment they lock eyes Patience starts loping toward her.

Tovolar's insistent. "Tell me you're coming home. Right now. Tell me you're coming home, and I'll let you go."

Soft fur against her palm. Her stomach settles, just for an instant.

"Arlinn. Please. We want you with us. You *belong* with us."

She closes her eyes again. There: the cathedral's stained glass.

Light shifts. A clearing in the woods, and the four wolves within it.

She walks forward, into the light, and they surround her.

Arlinn opens her eyes. Now she understands: he isn't going to let up until she says what he wants to hear.



"I'm home," she says. Even these two words come out slurred, even this is a great effort, but she manages.

It isn't a lie.

The woods are home, the wolves are home, the church is home, all of it is.

Even as he helps her up, even as he hugs her tight—this, too, is home. To a young Arlinn freshly changed this simple gesture once meant the world. And it does still, now, to know that there is yet this much gentleness in him.

But the ferocity, the mercilessness—they have overtaken him. Whatever kindness he shows now cannot wipe away what he's done today. The Tovolar who looked after her has grown into the Tovolar who attacks innocents, and she has grown away from him.

Yet she knows, too, that he hasn't grown away from her.

Dizzy and bleeding as she is, she won't have much time or opportunity to get a better angle than this. It's underhanded. Some might even say it isn't right.

But if it stops this attack, then there's nothing more right in all the world.

She drives her claws deep into his sternum.

Tovolar lurches over. Realization is slow to dawn; he holds her, if anything, closer.

"Innistrad is home, Tovolar," she says. "And as long as I can breathe, I'm going to protect it."

A gasp is her only answer—his grasp turns malicious as his claws dig into her already wounded shoulder.

She stands, her hand still buried in him. "Call off the attack."



*"Defend the Celestus", by Andrey Kuzinskiy.*



How strange to see his eyes dimming in this way. He's hardy enough to live, she's almost certain, and likely will once the shamans get a look at him—but she has never once seen him staggered this way. Not even the first time they fought in the clearing. It isn't simply that she's hurt him physically. Something inside him is broken, something she can't feel from here.

"You lied," he rasps.

"Call it off," she repeats.

He presses his eyes shut. She wonders what he sees. Is it the girl he found in the woods that day, or is it something else—something that drove him to this level of unimaginable cruelty?

Whatever it is, it brings him to his senses. In a choked gurgle, he says: "Fine."

She sets him down, withdraws her hand, makes sure he's sitting up. The others will eat him alive if they catch him doubled over.

He looks at her again, and she shakes her head.

The howl goes up soon after that, a call for retreat only the wolves understand.

He does not ask her to follow.

...

Like ants crawling over a body, but in reverse: the wolves leaving the bleached-bone remains of the Harvesttide Massacre.

The name's already been born. From the lips of the cathars who now stand bruised and battered, from the witches who sort through the bodies in search of those who need their help the word has already been formed: *massacre*.

Arlinn cannot look on it for long. Too much like the Travails. Worse, in a way, with all the childish decorations now strewn about like the storm refuse. Carved pumpkins crushed beneath the bodies of the dead; cider pouring freely into puddles of blood; careful stalls broken in two by their keeper's bodies.

Less than an hour ago this was a place of hope.

What is it now?

Arlinn swallows. She wants to help. Her place is with the witches and the cathars, her place is tending to the fallen, but if Katilda doesn't complete her ritual then there won't be anyone to tend to. The crushed effigies around her are a grim reminder of that.

Innistrad endures.

She has to march on.



...

While the witches and the remaining guards tend to the wounded, the Candleguides keep smiling their strange smiles, pointing the way for the dead.

And there are so many dead.

Katilda's festival was a rousing success in the worst possible way. To see such a throng of bodies laid out at once is unthinkable to Arlinn. Her parents would never believe it. They never would have attended, would have turned up their noses, and muttered that safety lied in isolation. Then, as now, she knows what they really meant—that safety and fear were one and the same.

They're wrong.

Everyone keeping to themselves, thinking about themselves, that's how Innistrad got here. Vampires climbing toward eternity on the backs of the mortal; werewolves hunting the people they should be protecting. Division caused this. Had the wolves realized the importance of keeping day and night in balance, they could have *protected* the festival instead.

But that thought's a painful one.

She bounds ahead. There will be time to mourn later, time to eulogize the dead and explain to their families what went wrong. For any of this to mean something the ritual must be completed.

Those gathered beneath the Celestus must know that it's worth something.

Her body aches, her forepaws and shoulders screaming with every long step, but she charges ahead all the same—the only wolf heading toward the Celestus. Tune out the crying, tune out the screams, just run.

But there's one voice it's impossible to ever fully tune out.

"Arlinn!"

Chandra's calling out. Adeline's white horse comes up on Arlinn's right, galloping for his life toward the Celestus. A couple of hours ago she would have hated being outrun by a *horse*, of all things, but now all she feels is relief.

Because Chandra's holding out a hand. "You're in bad shape, come with us!" she shouts. "Teferi's gone ahead with a couple of the others, we have to catch up!"

Reaching out, staying together.

It's the only way to go.



Shifting to her human form, Arlinn takes Chandra's hand.

...

Chanting meets them first. Arlinn can't make out the words, but the sounds have the shape of towering oaks and old rivers. A glow runs up the arms of the Celestus and she thinks to herself, slumped against Adeline, that they look like her father's tongs, fresh from the fire.

It brings a giddy smile to her face. But maybe that's the blood loss, too.

"Chandra, doesn't it look like . . . "



*"Raze the Effigy", by Cristi Balanescu.*

"Looks like they're almost done, yeah," she answers. No point in correcting her. Arlinn looks ahead.

Chandra's right: whatever they're up to, it must be nearing completion. Hard to make out the details given the thick crowd gathered around the central platform, but that's more cause for joy than it is for worry.

Straight into the crowd they go. Adeline's armor and Chandra's flame serve as symbols of their station; gouts of fire say both to keep away and that the fight is not yet done. Dizzy as she is Arlinn can only partially make out the faces of those around her—but the hope in their eyes shines through.

And all of them are mouthing along to the chant.

What a strange cadence it has, lilting and rising, defiant and eerie. Elongated syllables creep in through her ears and dance there, pulling her thoughts along with them. If this is magic, then it is old magic indeed. It's settling into her veins now.

Closer and closer to the central platform. They can see it, now, see the masks of the Dawnheart Coven moving this way and that. Five on the edge of the platform drum in time to the chanting; five between them lead a jarring dance. In the center, two: Katilda, her mask shading much of her face, the Moonsilver Key held in her hands like something sacred and pure; Kaya, standing at the ready, searching the horizon for them.



When Kaya catches sight of them she starts waving her arms and gesturing them over.

The wooden bridge opens up before them. Chandra's first off the horse, and quick to help Adeline down. The two of them try to support Arlinn on the way down. With a cathar on one side and a pyromancer on the other, there isn't much room for Arlinn to sway. All the better.

One step. Another. The wood gives beneath them, creaks, and that too is part of the eerie song of the forest—the chant that lives now in their lungs.

One step, another. What would the angels think of this? What would the church think? This is nothing like a hymn, nothing like a prayer; it's something different but just as real. How is it that the words spring so readily to her lips when she's never heard them before? Have they been etched on her bones all this time?

One step, another. The witches are gathered before them. All at once, they turn to Chandra, Adeline, and Arlinn. Eyes meet beneath bent boughs and bones. Silver swirls within the irises of the witches—yes, this is old magic indeed.

At once, the witches speak in their collected voices: *"Arlinn Kord."*

She swallows.

Chandra and Adeline share a glance over her shoulders. Together, they help her to the altar. Before her is a golden bowl, fit for sunlight and honey, surrounded by dried herbs and old bones.

The eyes of Innistrad are upon her.

"I've come," she answers. It feels like the right thing to say.

*"Child of Blood and Fang. You stand on the line of Dawn, where Night and Day meet. You will lend us your strength."*

*I haven't been a child for quite some time,* she almost says, but you can't interrupt old rituals. Katilda must have known more about her than she thought. "What do you need?"

She addresses it to Katilda, for though the whole gathered crowd now speaks as one she can be sure it's Katilda pulling the strings. Everything smells of her.

*"Will you spill your blood for the day? Will your fangs protect those that live in fear?"*

Her eyes dart from one witch to another, to Teferi and Kaya, to Chandra and Adeline. No one seems to understand what exactly any of this means.

"I will," she answers. Of that she's sure.

*"Anoint the Sungold Lock."*





*"Secrets of the Key", by Alex Branwyn.*

Blood and fang, was it? *Dizzy* still, leaning on the altar for support, Arlinn touches the aching wound on her shoulder. This she then smears on the inside of the bowl—its surface surprisingly warm to the touch. Next, she takes one of the herbs and bites into it. A bitter taste fills her mouth, a welcome reprieve from the taste of metal. This she sets down atop the small smear of red.

The bowl begins to hum.

So, too, does the Celestus. Great gears groan as they spring once more to life; up above, the shadows shift as the arms strain against the rust and roots that bind them. Ground shifts beneath her but she keeps her hands on the altar. A good thing, too, or she would have fallen.

Kaya sets the Moonsilver Key down when Katilda gestures for it.

*"The coven offers root and soul."*

She picks up a gnarled root the size of Arlinn's arm, a thing likely as old as Innistrad itself. Sometimes you know age when you see it. Before Arlinn can get to wondering where it came from, Katilda flicks the tip with her finger. All at once, it fades to ash. This Katilda smears on the inside of the bowl, directly opposite Arlinn's blood.

That root's accounted for. But what of a soul? Arlinn doesn't like the sound of that.

She's about to ask when Katilda links eyes with her. The aura coming off of her—there will be no questions here, no interruptions. The ritual must continue.

And it is Katilda's eyes that give her away: a silver glow comes over them, then streams out. Her mouth lolls open and there too is a stream of silver—and these combine, pouring into the bowl.



The other witches loop their arms through Katilda's to support her as her body starts to go limp. Fear mounts in Arlinn's chest. This isn't . . . permanent, is it? Her eyes dart from the witches to Kaya. She mouths *is this all right?*

But she doesn't ever get the answer.

Because Kaya's looking up at something else, and a shadow looms large over the altar.

Something smells like death.

It happens quicker than a human eye can follow but conveniently just fast enough for Arlinn: a streak of red and gold like lightning down from the sky; Katilda swallowed up in its impossible color. Within that streak: Olivia Voldaren. There's no mistaking it; she would never want anyone to mistake her. The hand outstretched toward the Moonsilver Key is emblazoned with the Voldaren sigil, as is the rest of her armor.

And there's no way they can let her get the Key.

Arlinn dives for it, clutching it close to her stomach as she hits the ground. The sizzle of her skin is a small price to pay for keeping it safe. By then Olivia's taken to the sky above them. Katilda's body hangs limp in her arms. Olivia sneers down on them, her shoulders rising and falling with the bray of her awful laugh.

"Seems we're at an impasse," she says. "I've got your witch, you've got my Key."

Arlinn gets up on her knees, the Key still held tight. Something about it feels different now—cooler. "Neither of those are yours."

"On the contrary," Olivia answers. "That Key is *very much* mine. I need it terribly, you see. What I *don't* need is a shriveled old witch."

Kaya's at Arlinn's side in an instant. She's glad of the company, even if the news Kaya brings sends a chill down Arlinn's spine. "There's something going on with Katilda's soul. During the ritual I saw it leave her, and then . . ."

"And then?" Arlinn says.

Kaya frowns. "Olivia showed up. Hard to see what happened after."

Chandra's next, hands twitching, eyes fixed on the floating vampire. "We blast her, right?"

"Can't do that. Might hit Katilda," Kaya answers.

Up above, Olivia lets out a theatrical sigh. With all the flair of an extremely bored widow, she rakes her claws across Katilda's chest. Blood sprays onto the cowering witches, the hypnotized crowd. "It's a very simple proposition. I'm getting bored of waiting for an answer. Either you



can give me that Key and I can get to planning my festivities, or you can keep *dithering* and your friend dies."

Arlinn scowls. "What if we complete the ritual?"

"Do we have time for that? Do we know how to do that?" Kaya whispers.

Time. Her mind goes to Teferi, around here somewhere, but even if she could find him he couldn't buy them enough. Slowing down the sun's no small task—she wouldn't be surprised if he was out of commission for a couple of days.

There's got to be another answer.

Her eyes land on two of the other witches. "The ritual?" she barks.

But they shake their heads. "It had to be her," answers one. "The spell's too old for us—"

*"Boring!"* shouts Olivia. She raises her hand for another blow—

There just isn't enough time. Not enough to consider everything, not enough to find another way through all of this, not enough to brute force it.

Innistrad has to survive.

Arlinn hurls the Key with her good arm.

Olivia's eyes light up. Again it happens quickly—she snatches the Key from the air with her free hand. Studying it only stokes the fires of her glee, even as smoke rises from her fingertips.

"Drop Katilda!" Arlinn shouts.

Glee turns to disgust. "That's no way to treat a soon-to-be-bride," she says.

"A deal's a deal," says Kaya. Arlinn's a little surprised to hear her, surprised that she's the one who understands but she'll take the help. "Hand her over."



*"Olivia's Midnight Ambush", by Chris Rallis.*



"Fine," answers Olivia. "Catch."

In the times to come, Arlinn will think about this moment and what she could have done differently. If she had moved a little faster, would it have been so bad? If she had acted sooner, if she had chosen something else—what would have happened?

For it is one thing to fall from a great height and it is another entirely when a vampire throws you. Katilda's body hurtles toward the altar at an astonishing speed.

It's all Arlinn can do to break her fall—to throw herself between them—but even that can only do so much. Bones crack as she crashes against Arlinn, and Arlinn crashes against the altar.

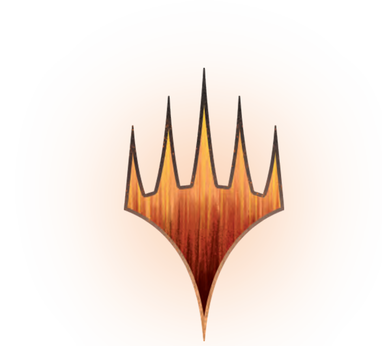
By the time the world's stopped spinning, the vampire's gone. Flown away from the looks of it—a distant speck of black against the already dark sky.

The Key's gone with her.

The Celestus has gone silent.

It is night on Innistrad.

It will be night from here to eternity.



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# INNISTRAD
# CRIMSON VOW

**By K. Arsenault Rivera**

# EPISODE I
# Tithes and Invitations

---

INNISTRAD ENTERS ETERNAL DARKNESS.
ARLINN AND THE GATEWATCH REGROUP
AFTER OLIVIA VOLDAREN STOLE THE MOONSILVER KEY.

---

Stensia sleeps soundly. The sleep of the undisturbed, the sleep of the carefree, the sleep of those utterly without worry—so sleep the vampires within their spires. They have no real need of sleep, but the peasants have need of it, and that makes it an almost novel thing. *Wouldn't it be delightful if—now, at the height of our power—we slept?*

It does not last long. An hour or two, perhaps. A nap. A joke, a gesture, a passing fascination.

But it is the best hour the humans of Stensia have had in weeks. With the moon high in the sky, though their bodies may long for a moment's respite, there isn't any to be found.

For when the vampires wake from their little jest they will doubtless hunger, and when they hunger they hunt, and when they hunt people die.



*"Bloodtithe Harvester", by Lucas Graciano.*

Grigori presses the knife to his mother's wrist. She does not move, she does not stir, for she too is asleep—and has been for some time. Two nights (it is difficult now to keep track) after the Harvesttide Massacre, his mother simply . . . fell asleep. Refused to wake. He had seen her before, so full of hope, carving her own effigies to burn in the streets. He had seen her after, when the moon refused to set, skin full of wounds, something in her now broken.

"Innistrad will endure," she had said to him. Another prayer the angels did not deign to hear.



And he sees her now, weeks later, still asleep. Sallow skinned and thin framed. Chest rising and falling. His mother.

Her blood drips into a small glass bowl. It is likely worth more than anything he has ever touched in his life—perhaps worth more than everything he's ever touched together—but it is not his.

The decree hanging outside his door was very clear on that part.

*Blessings and tidings upon the reader, for the day of most splendid joy approaches.*

*We eagerly await your tithes: one bowl of blood from each resident, once a night until the festivities. We have even been so generous as to provide you the bowls. Mind that they are enchanted; we shall know if you, ungrateful beast that you are, shatter them. Our representatives will be by to collect. Do not make the mistake of offending them. You know, I should think, the consequences of such foolish actions.*

*We hope that this found you well. If it did not, know that your blood will serve no matter your condition. You are not exempt.*

*Your eternal liege,*

*Olivia Voldaren, Unquestioned Lord of Innistrad*

He watches his mother's blood drip into the bowl and wonders, idly, what she would have made of such a proclamation. If she would have burned it, like he considered burning it. If they would have fled together for any other place than this.

Stensia.

Once, he loved this place: its spires, its secular air, its traditions. Everywhere on Innistrad there were traditions, of course, but only in Stensia did it feel like they had proper application. In Kessig they only suspected they were surrounded by werewolves. Here, the presence of vampires was as natural as the presence of the plague.

But how could you manage a plague that had so changed?

Some of the villagers had taken up jobs in the castles nearby. If you worked for them, they said, you were safe.

But sometimes you die out there in the castles, while you're on the job, and what's your family to do then?

And now, the tithes. The people here used to think they were safe—but even those who risked work in the palaces of the damned had to provide their blood.

Nothing felt right anymore.



Grigori picks up the bowl of his mother's blood. He kisses her forehead. With a fingertip, he wipes the rim, so that none spills on the ground as he carries it outside. Everywhere his eyes fall there is death, and there is emptiness. Weeks ago, his friends lit candles and sang songs outside their homes. Weeks ago, effigies burned in every window. Weeks ago, he could not take a step outside without seeing half a dozen of his friends grinning, arm in drunken arm, as they danced on the roads too frightening to walk.

But the streets were empty now. Too busy working, most of them—and those who didn't often died. It hadn't happened all at once, like the massacre, but it had happened all the same. These days the only people he saw on the roads were not people at all.

Those who could leave had left, though where he could not say. Things had gotten worse in Stensia, certainly, but they'd gotten worse everywhere else, too. From the scarce news he'd gathered, nowhere was safe anymore. In this everlasting night, they never have to rest. Where could you go to hide from the moon?

The lifegiving silver light of the moon is now only another kind of pallor upon the world.

Grigori sets the bowl down next to its twin, the one he filled an hour ago. Weary—from loss of blood and loss of hope—he sits on his haunches and stares up at the moon.

Black bats streak across the silver, a swarm thick as crows on a corpse. And, like crows, they've found something to carry: ornate black envelopes, slashed with white and red. He sees them as they soar past.

Some break off from the others. Two head straight for him, each stopping before the bowls. They pick them up in their little mouths, his blood and his mother's, and for an instant Grigori considers killing them. It would surely be an easy thing to snap their necks.

But within the day (could he even call them days?), they would come for him, and for his mother, and nothing at all would change except that the two of them would be dead.

Innistrad would continue on, dying and undying.

The bats take off.

Grigori watches them go.

He heads back in to take care of his mother.

He can only hope she, too, is sleeping soundly.

...

Adeline has known darkness in her life. She has known evil. Every breath she's taken since the tender age of twelve, when the Church first took her in, has been to strike down that which preys upon humanity.





*"Courier Bat", by Ilse Gort.*

It hasn't always been easy.

But it's been easier than this.

As she drives her sword through the vampire's heart she feels only the smallest kind of triumph: at least *he will not kill again*. Shame soon follows the thought. The work she's doing here is vital—more vital than it's ever been—but it is hungry work, too. And it has eaten away at something within her.

Yet that isn't the face she can present to the others. They are expecting the indomitable hero, the knight on a white horse, the beacon of justice in a world that's long forgotten the meaning of the word. They're looking for a light.

But so is Adeline.

Light finds her no sooner than the vampire hits the ground and Chandra's fires swallow the body whole. In the orange glow, Adeline's eyes find her companion's.

Adeline can put on the brave face for everyone else—but only Chandra can see her now.

She lets her shoulders slump. She lets exhaustion reach her eyes. In the dark of the night, Chandra's flames are brighter than the moon.

The pyromancer doesn't ask if Adeline's okay. They both know that would be a pointless question. Instead, she squeezes Adeline's shoulder.

"You know, I found some wine in one of these old houses," she says. "Think we've earned a little treat."

Despite all that's happened, there's still a twinkle to Chandra's voice. Dimmer, these days, but it's there. Adeline lets it guide her for just a little while.



"It'll have to wait until after the meeting," she says, "but you're on."

The remains of the vampire smolder in front of them, the stench of cooking flesh crawling up their nostrils. Adeline sheathes her sword and heads upwind. All around them, their rag-tag group fights back. Some, like her, use weapons, battling the last of this old bloodsucker's ghouls and thralls. Some do it with compassion: the witch Deidama is among the many tending to the sick, the wounded, those who have seen too much and borne too much weight already. Magic cannot soothe all their ills.

But the right thing to do is to try.

This is the fifth counterattack they've launched this week. A little boy heard that there were those who fought against the endless night. When the vampires descended upon the village of Karo, he ran to them, his feet cracking open on the rocks in his path. Arlinn was the first person he found—and it's Arlinn who watches over him now, telling him a story as one of the witches tends to his wounds. The blood streaked and drying across her leathers makes a strange complement to the stew she's pouring into a bowl for the boy.

As Adeline and Chandra approach, Arlinn casts a glance their way. She gives the boy a nod and a heartening smile before breaking off to meet with them. Alongside her: Teferi, Kaya, Deidama, some of the other witches, deputized fiendslayers. Their group is not large, perhaps only two or

three dozen to protect humanity, yet they are fierce siblings-in-arms. The rest—two hundred—remained in the woods. People needed a place to go when their homes were destroyed.

"How'd it go?" Arlinn asks.

"Fiends vanquished," Chandra answers.

Adeline nods, grateful she found such a bright way to put it. "The village will take time to rebuild, but they'll have safety. At least for tonight."

"Good work," says Arlinn. "We'll do what we can for them. Good thing about Kessigers—we can raise a house in a day. Give it a week or two and there'll be plenty of room for everyone."

There's much unsaid—that first the villagers will need to survive that long, that it's harder to build in the absolute darkness, that more will fall before anything can rise at all.

But it's tiring, too tiring, to think of that now. Arlinn's right: they'll do what they can. Other villages need them, too.

"You wanted to call a meeting?" she says.

Arlinn points to a makeshift campsite—the village's firepit, surrounded by flattened tree stumps and handwrought benches. One by one the valiant take their seats. Somehow, the smallest bench—suitable for two—



remains empty for her and Chandra. Kaya's work, probably; she's the one smirking.

Well. Adeline won't argue. She sits, resting her sword against her knees. "So . . ."

All eyes align on Arlinn. The endless night's worn on her, too—that, and whatever drove her fight with Tovolar. Adeline sees more of the wolf than the woman, especially outside of meetings like this one. The sigh that leaves her this time is all too human.

"There's no song and dance about it," she says. "We can't keep this up."

"But what about Teferi's time magic?" Adeline asks. "Surely he could . . ."

Teferi presses his lips together. He looks up at the treacherous moon and back down. "Unfortunately, there isn't much I can do. Innistrad's solar system is a complicated one. The magic that's keeping the moon in place is ancient and tailored specifically for this plane." His shoulders slump. "Even assuming I did figure out how to do it without ruining the plane's ecosystems, it'd take more power than I currently have."

"This is bigger than any one person can solve," Kaya says. "Much as I'd prefer the alternative, we're going to need to stick together on this one."

"I don't understand," says Adeline. "We've grouped up already, haven't we?"

"We have. But our group, for the most part, is human," Arlinn explains. And she is right—apart from two or three of the remaining Wolfir, everyone *is* human. But why wouldn't they be? Adeline searches Arlinn's eyes for an explanation. It's quick to come. "The endless night doesn't just affect humans. If things continue the way they are, the vampires are going to run out of food eventually. Ten years, maybe, the whole plane's picked clean. Once upon a time, there was someone among them who realized that. We need to pay him a visit."

Chandra's laugh is a nervous one. "Please say you're kidding."

"Chandra is right," says Adeline. "If you're talking about Sorin Markov, he showed us no kindness before. Why should that change now?"

Arlinn must have known this was coming—she doesn't let the question hang in the air very long. "Because everything's changed. Besides, it was Olivia Voldaren who stole the Moonsilver Key. If anyone will know something about her plans, it's him."

"And if the rumors I've heard are true, he hates her guts right about now," Kaya adds. Then, after a beat: "It's all anyone in Stensia can talk about. She's asking everyone there to donate a bowl full of blood."

"Which means she's up to something," Adeline agrees. "But why do we have to ask him?"



"We don't have any other way in," says Teferi. "Sorin's in a mood, but he's always been pragmatic. As our leading expert on egomaniacal planar guardians—"

"Give me a few years," Kaya cuts in.

"—and someone who's known him for centuries, I think we can get through to him. This isn't the first time he's been in a mood, after all. In fact, come to think of it, I'm not sure if I've ever seen him any other way. But if nothing else, I'm sure he'll tell us what Olivia is planning."

"None of this ends unless we can get our hands on the Key again. He's the only one who might give us a clue where it is," says Kaya.

It makes sense. Yet there's something Adeline can't forgive about him. "Arlinn, the last time we saw him, he was fighting Sigarda."

The muscles of Arlinn's jaw work. "I know. It . . . this isn't easy for me, either. But when part of your flock's gone astray, you don't leave them to the wolves."

"But he isn't a sheep," Adeline says, "and you *are* a wolf."

A wry, knowing smile from the woman. "Means I know a thing or two about hunting, and a thing or two about packs. Adeline, I'd like if you came with us—but if you want to stay, I'll understand."

Adeline knows what's right; she knows how often the just thing is the heaviest thing. Cathars sometimes trained with weighted swords to drive the message home: the violent path should never be the first one taken; it should never feel *easy* to snuff out life.

If they *can* get through to him, maybe it's worth trying.

She feels Chandra's eyes on her, waiting for the answer. "I'll go. If there's a trace of Avacyn left in him, he'll listen."

Later, as they're gathering to leave, the boy from Karo finds her. He is waiting outside of her makeshift tent, his feet bandaged, in too-big armor he's scavenged. The Avacynian symbol on the front is nearly as long as he is. The pig he brought with him—a gigantic thing easily the size of a horse—sniffs at the ground nearby.

"How can I help?" he asks her.

Adeline kneels down. "You've already helped plenty," she says. From the folds of her armor, she produces a symbol woven from sticks and unlit candles, which she drapes over his head. "The best thing you can do is get back home safe."

...

Innistrad will endure, so the saying goes. But one look out the window is all it takes to render that meaningless. There is no way Innistrad can endure this.





*"Sorin the Mirthless", by Martina Fackova.*

Sorin Markov is sure of it.

He's been sure of it for nameless centuries. Inclined as he was to philosophy, he sorted out the truth of the matter not long after his grandfather turned him. If no vampire ever died, and each vampire fed once a month, often killing their 'donor', speaking conservatively, and humans took nine months to reproduce. . .

Well, it just didn't make sense.

Even discounting humans who died of diseases, humans who became vampires, humans crunched between the jaws of wolves, and so forth—it didn't work. For Innistrad to endure (the saying existed even then), they would need to either severely limit the amount of vampires created, or ensure that humans lived.

Sorin, young then, approached his grandfather with his discovery. Edgar had long fostered the boy's interest in alchemy; surely, once he saw it all laid out in black and white, he'd realize the grave error he'd made.

Edgar listened intently to young Sorin's words. More than that, he asked insightful questions at every junction. In that two hours Sorin learned more of the world than he had in preparing the presentation. His grandfather cast all his sources in a new light.

"Sorin. Do you truly believe I've never had the same thought?"



"But Grandfather," Sorin objected, "if you have, then why proceed in this way? The future is not intangible; as immortals, we will have to face it. Innistrad must endure—"

"Innistrad will endure. But only peasants feel the need to say so," his grandfather countered. "We have eternity to plan for it—or very near to it. The solution will present itself."

"Grandfather, this can't wait—"

"On the contrary. You're staring at only a small part of history's tapestry," said Edgar. Then, he picked up one of his quills and dipped it in ink. The scratch of it against parchment was a dismissal.

*A small part.*

He took his grandfather's advice. The solution would present itself. He had to think bigger, had to see beyond the immediate. The thought lingered in the back of his mind no matter where he went, growing more complex with every passing year.

It took six millennia for the larger picture to come together, but once it did, it felt obvious and right. He felt foolish for not seeing it sooner. Humans needed a protector. He gave them one.

Of course, by then, his fellow vampires had nearly drunk the plane dry. It was a very close thing, saving Innistrad as he had.

Yet defeat found him, and defeat found her, and now even to breathe the air of this place fills him with bitterness.

Part of him wonders if his grandfather had planned for Avacyn, and planned for her eventual fall. Edgar thought of everything, after all, and he knew his grandson better than anyone ever had and likely ever would. Had he planned for this eternal night? Had he known what it would do to the vampire population? To the human population?

All of his years of life had not prepared Sorin for it.

At first, he'd taken the role of observer. Licked his wounds, holed up in the manor and watched it all unfurl. The others knew as well as he did what would happen if they gorged themselves.

But if impatience is the last thing to die among vampires, then inhibition is the first. By Sorin's count they have only months before all the humans on this plane were vampires, werewolves, geists, or just plain dead.

His grandfather had been slumbering for long enough. If there was a plan for this eventuality, then it was time the two of them spoke.

Sorin descends the steps of Markov Manor. His short war with Nahiri, his failed protégé, left much of the place in ruins, but the family archives remained largely intact, buried deep underground as they were. Twisted, floating knife-blades gave way to graceful white arches and smooth stairs.



Here, the geistflame burned bright; here, there was no dust on the steps nor motes in the air. Sorin himself enchanted this place. If all of Innistrad were to collapse in on itself today, his family archives would remain in testament to their own foolishness.

There were the books, of course, the first thing to greet him—carefully curated collections of all of the plane's wisdom. His grandfather's journals were given special treatment here, bound in golden covers and displayed beneath the purest glass. Three bookcases comprised Sorin's own journals—those he was not actively re-reading, or writing. The musings of generals, alchemists, even cathars and Avacynian priests winked back at him from their places on the shelves.

*Save us,* they seem to say.

How often people said those words to him. He grew weary of other people's problems, of saving other planes, of the vast and complicated web he'd woven in his unending life. Innistrad—at least he knew Innistrad. He thought he could recover here. Once his house was in order, so to speak, he might emerge and deal with the other planes once more.

*Save us,* they say to him.

*I'm trying,* he wants to say.

Past the books were portraits, statues, and the armory. He walks the narrow halls of white stone and does not stop to peruse the works of his brethren. Innistrad would endure. There would be time, later, if he wanted to lose himself in the memories of a House that never embraced him.

Only a little further to the coffins.

When elders tired of the plane around them they often rested until the world grew so alien that they could discover it anew. If he were a normal vampire—a simple immortal without the ability to leave Innistrad—he might have ended up here himself. But there must always be someone to watch over them, and, without fail, this person was always Sorin.

He resents them. He does not hide it, not here in the cold silence of the tomb. He glares at each name above each coffin and he asks them in his mind why they could not be bothered to emerge. It was their decadence that led to all this, and yet here they were resting—perhaps even dreaming—while he cleaned up their mess.

Exhausting.

He has a coffin, too. A foolish thing. A promise he made to himself that he would rest.

The only thing keeping him from smashing it is the thought that his grandfather might see, and might name it the childish fit of pique it is.



Onward. His grandfather rests in a mausoleum at the very end of the corridor, protected by a massive stone door. Often, Edgar woke for small spells. Sorin left him books for those cases—things he thought exemplified the current state of Innistrad. Sometimes, when he needed his grandfather's counsel, he would even wake him. The two would speak in the drawing room of the dead, and when it was done, Edgar would rest once more. It always left Sorin feeling like a child—but the advice had not once failed him.



*"Fateful Absence", by Eric Deschamps.*

Resigned, he walks into the mausoleum expecting to see his grandfather resting in the mighty coffin Sorin commissioned for him, or reading at his stately desk—and instead finds an empty room.

There are no statues here to greet him. Gone are the table, the chairs, even the empty teapot he kept here. Dust silhouettes the bookshelves where his grandfather's collection of knowledge used to dwell.

But none of this compares to the largest lack in the room: the coffin itself is missing.

Fury burns in his heart. It so often does, and yet now there is so little left to burn that all he can do is laugh.

Of course. Yesterday he'd allowed himself to leave the grounds. He'd wanted to see what was going on with his own two eyes.

Of course someone had struck while he was away.

He pinches his nose. Considers his options. It is then that he hears the flapping of wings and feels the air shifting within the palace. Someone else is here. Perhaps more than one intruder.

He turns, snatching at the sound. A bat, by the feel of it. He crushes it without a second thought. Within its clutches—stained now by its blood—there is a single envelope.



*To my Dearest, Most Precious Sorin Markov, Whom We Could Never Forget on This Day.*

He knows that handwriting.

It takes centuries of patience not to crush the envelope, too. Instead, he opens it.

The words within do nothing for his mood. Oh, no. If his previous gloom was the darkness of a new moon, then this is the darkness of a moon snatched from the sky, never to return.

He throws the bat's limp body into a corner of the mausoleum and storms back up the stairs. There are other intruders; he can feel them, still If they have any part of this mockery . . .

". . . careful, that book's bound in human flesh."

The voice echoes down to him. A woman. Familiar, but only vaguely. They're in the library. When he comes upon them, they're standing in a half circle around his reading desk. Some of them he knows, but there are plenty of new additions. Seems they've picked up some strays along their travels: a thief of some kind, her eyes quicker and her smirk sharp; the pyromancer, hands in the air like she's seen something horrible. Then his eyes land on Teferi. Jovial as always, he's hiding a laugh. Teferi puzzled Sorin. He so rarely met others who could see the whole of history or

anyone who smiled so easily. The wolf, Arlinn Kord, with her hands on her hips, lecturing. And the cathar that last came with them.

All in *his* library, in *his* family archives, behaving like children when confronted with one of the foremost texts on stitching in Innistrad. Of *course* it was bound in human vellum, what else did they expect? He didn't keep work by *novices*.

He has half a mind to puppet them all out of here, to grab them by their veins and set them walking. The other half—older, more patient, cognizant of his awful position—realizes that they must have come here for a reason.

"You have one minute to tell me why you're trespassing here," he growls.

Perhaps they did not hear him coming, for most snap to attention. Arlinn and Teferi are the lone exceptions. It is frustrating to him how easy Teferi remains, how none of this seems to trouble him. Worse yet, the wolf's eyes are on the letter.

"I think you know why we're here, Sorin," she says. "But the real question is: what's that?"

He could refuse to answer. But the truth—loath as he is to admit it—is that she's right. He knows why she's here. The eternal night bodes ill for the humans she cares so much about. Of course she would come to him again for help.



And, if honesty is the name of the hour . . .

He throws the letter upon the table. The thief snatches it up first, the pyromancer leaning over her shoulder to read. Like a child, the latter cannot conceal her shock.

"It's an invitation," he says.



*"Wedding Invitation", by Justyna Gil.*

“An invitation?” Arlinn echoes. She, too, leans over to get a better look at the letter, but by now the others are blocking her view with their rubbernecking.

“To a wedding. *Oliva Voldaren’s* wedding.” The name is poison on his tongue. “She’s stolen my grandfather. If they marry, they’ll form the largest of the vampire families. They’ll—*she’ll* rule all of Innistrad.”

Arlinn snatches the letter away from the pyromancer. He watches as she reads it—watches her jaw work, watches as she realizes he isn’t lying.

Then she fixes him with a look of surprising determination. “Looks like we’ve got a wedding to crash.”

# EPISODE II
# The Dolorous Weight of Pleasantries

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SORIN VENTURES INTO THE VAMPIRE WEDDING WITHOUT THE GATEWATCH ONLY TO DISCOVER HIS FAMILY HAS ALREADY ARRIVED.

---

"Have you seen her yet?"

"No, have you?"

"Terrible, just terrible, to make us wait so long just for her to make an appearance. She might think she's Lord of Innistrad, but—"

"—don't say that so loudly, Relio—"

"—but she's far from it! I won't believe it until I see it myself."

Relio drinks from his goblet. A little blood dribbles down his chin, staining his pure white ruff, which Cordelia warned him would happen. He never listens to her. Don't feed on wastrels, she told him, but there he went; don't antagonize the Nusfar simply because they look like children, she said, only to find him dangling blood-soaked candies over the head



*"Voldaren Estate", by Richard Wright.*

of a girl at least five times his age. Of all the vampires Cordelia knows, Relio seems the most eager to part with his immortality.

Frankly, she's sick of dealing with it. There's so much else to see. Stromkirk cultist meetings had their own charms, yes, but they didn't have an ounce of this ostentation. Cordelia likes a good prophetic sermon as much as the next woman, but sometimes it's good to see how the other side lives.



Practically everyone's gathered at the Voldaren Estate for the wedding. Olivia's truly outdone herself with the decorating. Cordelia didn't know that was possible. Still, it's hard to argue with the sights. The Voldaren Estate is swirling with red: the carpet red beneath their feet, chased with golden thread; red in the gowns and suits of the attendees per the dress code; red, beautiful and dark, in the tiered blood fountains every few paces. But most impressive of all were the swirling red petals dancing through the air. Once, centuries ago, Cordelia tended gardens. Watching the petals float in the air reminds her of days long gone.

And it's far better than listening to Relio go on.

He's still talking, but she's no longer paying attention. Something about Olivia letting the Domnathi come. And what was so bad about that, she wanted to ask? Oh, yes, they consorted with demons, but there aren't any demons *here*, or at least none that Cordelia can see, and at least the Domnathi listened to the dress code. Relio came in white and blue. Honestly. His sleeves are already purpling with all the petals, the blood regaining its liquid form when it comes into contact with the cloth.

A human walks by, thankfully providing another distraction from her companion's ceaseless chattering. Olivia's fine taste truly is on display tonight—thralls are strapping, lithe, beautiful, and handsome, but never boring. The tray in his hands holds crystal goblets of fresh blood; Cordelia considers for a long moment if she'd be chastised for drinking straight

from the tap instead. There are no marks on this man's rippling form. Probably not worth risking it if he's someone's special pet. Besides, there are five duels going on in the Hall already, one of which has taken a turn toward evisceration. It's unbecoming to eviscerate someone at a wedding.

Doesn't stop the Nusfar, though. Few things do. As Cordelia picks up another goblet, a boy who looks all of ten drives his hand into a man's chest. She tuts. The victim is Kristoff Laurent, a Markov known for dueling at the drop of a hat—but all the martial skill in the world won't save you against the pure predator instinct of the Nusfar. She liked Kristoff, though, as passionate everywhere as he was on the battlefield.

Watching him bleed out now she feels only the barest trace of sadness. Ah well. Love is as fleeting as a flower, even for immortals.

"And just look at who she's invited. Monsters. I tell you, being a vampire doesn't mean what it used to mean," Relio prattles. "Why, that we're all bowing to this *madwoman* should tell you something."

"Relio, you're a Voldaren," she says flatly.

"That only means I know her better than most! Two hundred years ago we'd never be cavorting with *Domnathi*—"

Relio's next nonsense dies the moment he does, drowned in the blood welling up from his mouth. Like a waterfall it spills down his chest. He



reaches out for Cordelia, but she sidesteps his dying grasp. Three seconds later his corpse falls with a *thunk* onto the polished marble floor.

Henrika Domnathi, noted demon sympathizer, stands just behind him. Crimson tendrils weave about her fingers. Dark, arterial blood fills her goblet. When she fixes Cordelia with her steely glare, it is all she can do to keep from running away.

"Terribly boring man," she says. "Friend of yours?"

"No. Not at all, Lady Domnathi, not at all," Cordelia says.

The rumored one-time lover of Griselbrand smirks. "Good. And you are?"

"Cordelia—"

"Ahh, yes, a Stromkirk, aren't you?" she says. The way she studies Cordelia's outfit feels uncomfortably like a cat surveying a mouse. "I've had *questions* for your kind lately, but it seems no one will answer them for me. Isn't that a shame?"

There are whispers about what Henrika Domnathi does to people who won't answer her questions. Faint ones, because everyone's terrified of speaking them aloud. The Domnathi bloodline is famous for consorting with demons, though to what end remains unclear. And even worse than that, it's said they'll do . . . favors for those demons, in exchange for pow-

ers of which other vampires can only dream. And when it came to Henrika herself, well . . .

A human thrall wordlessly bends over to drag Relio's body away. It's enough to avert Cordelia's attention for just a second. A primal fear comes over her: she may be a vampire, but so was Relio. She's not looking to end up like him. If Henrika wants she could just kill her right—

*Ting, ting, ting.*

Silence rolls over the grand hall like a crimson tide as all eyes land on the dais.

Olivia Voldaren has finally arrived.

And what an entry she's made! Floating down the steps in her wedding finery, her swirling, haunted sanguine train held aloft by bats! Every gleaming arcane light glitters anew, every one illuminating some new detail: the glimmer of her golden jewels, the glint of her teeth, the glamor of a gown made from the spirits of her oldest victims. In all the time Cordelia's been alive—a few hundred years now—she's never seen such sartorial heights. That collar's got to be at least as tall as some toddlers.

Even Henrika's impressed, a soft *hmm* escaping her lips. She drapes an arm around Cordelia. "What a shame, the party's begun."





*"Olivia, Crimson Bride", by Anna Steinbauer.*

"Wh-what a shame," Cordelia repeats.

But Olivia saves them from any further conversation.

"Greetings, my *dearest* friends, my most *ardent* enemies!" No good can ever come of her sounding so happy. "I see we've already had some murders. What fun! I can't tell you how happy it makes me to have blood sacrifices at my wedding! But what would a wedding be without a groom?"

She holds aloft her glass in signal to some unseen forces. Soon she is no longer alone on the dais: a group of immaculately dressed thralls—most in Avacynian finery, for the joke—emerge carrying an elaborate stone coffin: marble inlaid with gold, crowned by Markovian rays.

The thralls set the coffin down standing up.

In that moment, the ballroom is as silent as it will ever be.

...

Chandra Nalaar walks face-first into danger.

That's her usual routine. It *usually* works. Tonight, as she tries to walk past the guards outside the Voldaren Estate, it doesn't. Instead, Teferi grabs her by the shoulders just as a bird flies into the wall. Whatever magic they've got incinerates it right then and there. Crumbles of bird-shaped ash fall where it made contact.

"Well . . . I guess that's not going to work," Chandra says.

Adeline stifles a laugh, which almost makes the whole thing worth it. Chandra hasn't heard her laugh in a while. With some bitterness she glances to the towering guards on either side of the gate. It isn't their fault *directly,* but they are part of the problem.





*"By Invitation Only", by Micah Epstein.*

Coming right to the front gates was Arlinn's idea. If there was a wedding going on—and if they showed up a small group, with Sorin—then maybe they'd be let in. Chandra thought it was stupid from the get-go. Who ever heard of letting the enemy waltz right into your operation just because they came in fancy dress? But Sorin thought it was worth a shot too, so here they were.

But as far as she's concerned the right answer here is to light the whole thing on fire. The guards will scatter, or else they'll get caught, and they can fight this out.

It was do-or-die time on Innistrad. On the way here, their group rallied whoever they could to join up. Turns out it's a lot easier to do when there's a plan, and when that plan involves crashing a vampire party. There's a lot of anger out there on the moors and the heaths and the cliffs, a lot of fire just looking for something to consume.

Chandra knows all about that.

The ranks of mounted cathars lying in wait will charge right in. Sigardan priests will start their chants, bright prayer wrapping about the gathered townspeople like the wings of angels, and that will be that. There'll be no hope for any of the vampires. Scoop up the Moonsilver Key and go.

But when things seem simplest to her they're often more complicated to everyone else. Looking on the faces of her companions—only the five of them, the rest concealed not far off—she gets the feeling that must be the case here, too. Especially Sorin. He looks like someone slipped vinegar into his serving of blood, which is impressive given that she didn't think he could possibly look any more sour. First time for everything, she supposes.



"No one enters without an invitation," the guards say. Olivia Voldaren must have selected two vampires whose voices could perfectly harmonize for just this job, because they do, and it is the most sonorous dismissal in all of Innistrad.

"What about if we all come in with him?" Arlinn asks. She looks handsome in her wedding outfit, but then she looks handsome in most things. Still, she's got excellent taste: a well-tailored oxblood jerkin, sprigs of birch embroidered at the collar, her red-slashed sleeves ending in fresh-pressed white cuffs. A fur mantle worn over one shoulder adds a woodsy touch; knowing her, she probably took down the bear herself. It is nice to see her all cleaned up—like seeing your favorite aunt at a party. "He has an invitation."

"One person per invitation," the guards intone together.

"But that doesn't make any sense," Chandra says. "Not even a plus one?

"You can definitely afford to let more people in," says Kaya, gesturing at their gilded armor. "It isn't a matter of scarcity."

"And if you want to make sure all of Innistrad bows to its new Lady, then you need investment from *everyone*," says Arlinn. "You can't just invite vampires."

"It's bad form," agrees Teferi.

"One person per invitation."

Chandra wants to scream. The answer's so simple. Just go in, right? Just go in.

But there's the wards all around the place—wards the witches haven't been able to crack and the priests haven't been able to dispel. There's the vampire army all along the watch towers, waiting for any sign of unrest. Who knows how many of them have magic of their own? Who knows how hungry they are? Sure, Arlinn and Adeline managed to put together a small army's worth of people—but was everyone ready to come to blows here?

Right here, right now?

As much as Chandra wants to fight, she can't ignore the cost of it out in the open like this. Without the Key, or the immediate hope of the Key, it's going to end like the Harvesttide Massacre.

That day carved itself into her mind, and the scar of it will remain for years, she's sure: the bodies lying out in the balmy orange of the setting sun; their blood, red as cranberry wine, seeping into the festive costumes they'd spent so much time putting together. Dressing as werewolves and vampires was meant to be an act of defiance. To see their bodies lying broken instead . . . Battlefields were sickening enough on their own.

But these were innocent people. Barely grown, some of them.



And when she thinks of them—no, no. They can't just walk in.

Maybe Adeline knows what she's thinking. The cathar's hand is a comforting weight on Chandra's shoulder, as is the faint smell of leather that always announces her presence. The parade armor she's wearing is swoonworthy enough, engraved with Avacynian symbols, but she always smells so good, too. "Patience rewards the virtuous," she says, "but . . . I admit, it's difficult sometimes to be virtuous."

"Tell me about it," says Chandra. Best not to let it linger. "Real shame though. Here we are, both looking sharp, with nowhere to go. I was promised a party."

"A party? Is that all this is?"

The deep voice hits like a punch to the ribs. Chandra doesn't flinch. In some sense, she's happy he's finally paying attention to the world around him instead of brooding. "I mean, it isn't *just* a party," she says. "I'm trying to lighten the mood, Sorin."

"I'm certain this is all a fun romp for you, Nalaar, but I'll remind you there are adults present," said Sorin.

"Some of the adults could use a laugh," Teferi says. "Chandra's proven herself time and again, she's earned her right to joke around. This isn't

her home plane, either—she could have ignored the summons, or left after Harvesttide. But she's here."

Sorin looked down at the invitation in his hands. He furrowed his brow. Chandra thought he looked just like a moody old portrait, which made her laugh, because he'd hate to hear that. She was at least quick enough to bite her lip to stifle it. No matter how ridiculous Sorin is as a person—or how much she might dislike him—it's hard to imagine what she'd be feeling in this situation.

"Will you be all right in there alone?" Arlinn asks him.

"I can try to follow you," Kaya offers.

It's a funny thought, a little ghost Kaya hovering around the sullen Sorin. Chandra knows it doesn't work that way; Kaya isn't *really* a ghost, so at most she'd be following behind him full-sized. Still, somehow the image feels right. But what feels right, too, is the way he sighs and shakes his head.

"I've been alone for centuries," he says. "This will be no different."

She wants to ask him what he means, because he won't be alone. He's related to a bunch of people in that place. Must be someone in there he likes, right?

But as he strides between the guards, Sorin doesn't have the air of a man who likes anyone.



…

Sorin walks alone.

The guards on either side of him must think otherwise. With the barrier secure, they opted to escort him to the castle, sending messenger bats for reinforcements to replace them at the outer gates.

Every one of his footfalls is echoed by theirs—the sharp tap of his shoes on the marble floors, the soft clatter of their armor. If they chose, they could move as soundlessly as moonlight through the darkness. But instead there is the steady rhythm of their steps for company.

And soon, their braying.

"You didn't adhere to the dress code," says one. Sorin does not know his name, and does not care to. "The colors were specified in the invitation."

Towers floated atop chunks of rock on either side of them. Within each of those towers, a host of Voldarens and their guests pour blood for each other. The scent of debauchery reaches him even here. He wonders if all of them are adhering to the dress code. In the distance, the churning sea continues ever on its course, ignorant to what occurs here.

He says nothing.

Petals of blood land on his cloak, coloring the frost.

Onward through the gates of the castle, filigreed with the Voldaren symbol and Olivia's silhouette within it. The sheer audacity of the woman. If egos alone could conquer, Olivia Voldaren would have long since carved her throne from the bones of Innistrad.

Tonight, she will.

The woman at the door looks him up and down with clear disgust, as if his finery is somehow less appropriate because it is black and gray. Sorin might not have the patience for vampire politicking, but he knows well enough how to dress. Unlike many of these whelps.

"Your invitation?"

He hands it over, fuming though he may be. They knew who he was. Everyone knew who he was. Olivia must have told this girl to act in such a way—a simple fledgling at the door to welcome all the Lords and Ladies. Had Olivia picked her for the way she pouted? For the utter disinterest in her voice?

"Go ahead."

A younger Sorin would have bristled at this.

But he is older now, and tired. The sooner this is over with the better.



Onward through the doors, where music swallows him whole. Enthralled musicians play near gilded fountains of blood. The piece is at least three hundred years old by his count; everyone here knows it. And, indeed, there are some who dance to the tune even here where the party has not yet begun. The green light filtering in through the windows lends everything an eerie cast, as if he is watching a painting in place of people.

But then it comes, inevitable as the outside tides—one of the revelers gets hungry, wanders over, and tears out a musician's throat.

Really, some of these guests can't be counted as people. To be given over to your desires so thoroughly that you cannot keep yourself from ruining the entertainment is to be less than human.

And they are all like this. Yes, for thousands of years, they have all been like this.

"Sorin? Is that Sorin Markov?"

He keeps walking.

The hallways of the Voldaren Estate are meant to confuse. It's one of Olivia's oldest tricks: get the revelers drunk by ones means or another, tell them they absolutely shouldn't wander off, make a few people disappear when they do. There are more geists in the Muttering Corridors than there are pages in all of Olivia's library. Each one a victim of hers. Each

one wandering these weird halls, where doors sometimes lead to sudden drops and stairs are given to rearrange.

But the trick of it is that the Voldaren Estate follows Olivia's whims.

And she is as predictable as she is loathsome.

On some level, he knew this was going to happen. Something like this. During his ignoble prison sentence she was already making ludicrous grabs for power. It was only natural that someone so nakedly ambitious would hit on the idea of a political marriage. And once she'd had the idea, there were few on Innistrad who could offer her an increase in power. Henrika loved revenge more than power; the Falkenrath had no one to offer; Runo Stromkirk would sooner give himself to the unknowable beings of the sea. That left Sorin—unattainable to her—or his grandfather.

He should have known.

The closer they come to the ballroom the more people they run into. Thralls who do not dare to look at him. Fledglings who do so with abandon, as if the act of laying eyes on Sorin Markov is something so profoundly profane as to change the course of their ageless existence.

"That's him, the man in the rock," they say. "How *droll!*"

"Shouldn't he have a mouth like a Gorger?" He's familiar with the term, but only in passing. The Falkenrath had earned a new name for themselves.



"He's handsome, for such a fool."

They giggle as they flit by him, mouths red with their last meals. Glasses clink together. Behind him, the guards' armor keeps clattering; above him, petals of blood float on clouds of music.

Silently, he thinks of all he has done to enable this life they lead.

He hates it here.

Onward, to the ballroom itself, a space so wide it is difficult to imagine how it fits within the castle's architecture. The moon alone could not provide ample lighting; spectral yellow-green magic fills in the gaps. Dancers, duelists, lollygaggers and layabouts—there are hundreds of them gathered, and all are reflected upon the polished marble floors. Fountains of blood offer succor and inebriation; chained thralls offer something a little *fresher* for the connoisseurs among the crowd.

A lithe man by the doors blows a horn.

"Announcing the *extremely welcomed, very honored,* Sorin Markov!"

He thinks, not for the first time, of murder.

But he knows what will come of that—he is surrounded on all sides here by those who want to see him brought low. All Olivia must do is say the word. Then they will all descend upon him, crows to the carrion, and

all the sangromancy in the world will only buy him another few moments. Meanwhile, Arlinn's ramshackle coalition will wait outside none the wiser.

So he does not kill the crier, and he does not kill any of the people who turn to look at him then. How many eyes are upon him? He does not know, but he can feel every one like the tip of a dagger across his flesh.

But the stake in his heart comes when he looks upon the dais.

There's no mistaking it: that is his grandfather's coffin.

And that woman, cloaked in the roiling souls of her victims, is Olivia Voldaren.

Silence reigns in the house of abandon.

Even from here—even across the ballroom—he can tell when she begins to smile.

"My *dearest* Sorin," she calls. "What a *delight!* You're right on time."

He scowls. A wave of restrained laughter rolls through the crowd. He doffs his cloak, casting it behind him, walking down the aisle to his grandfather's stolen coffin.

"Olivia, it's always a pleasure," he says. "I see you've spared no expense."



"And why should I? This joyous occasion deserves only the finest, wouldn't you agree? I wouldn't want your grandfather to wake to anything less than the best."

He cannot keep himself from clenching his teeth together.

But he continues. One step, another. Falling petals. Clinking glasses.

Olivia snaps her fingers. One of the thralls hands her an ornate knife.

"Ask him yourself, if you like," she says. "It'll only be a moment."

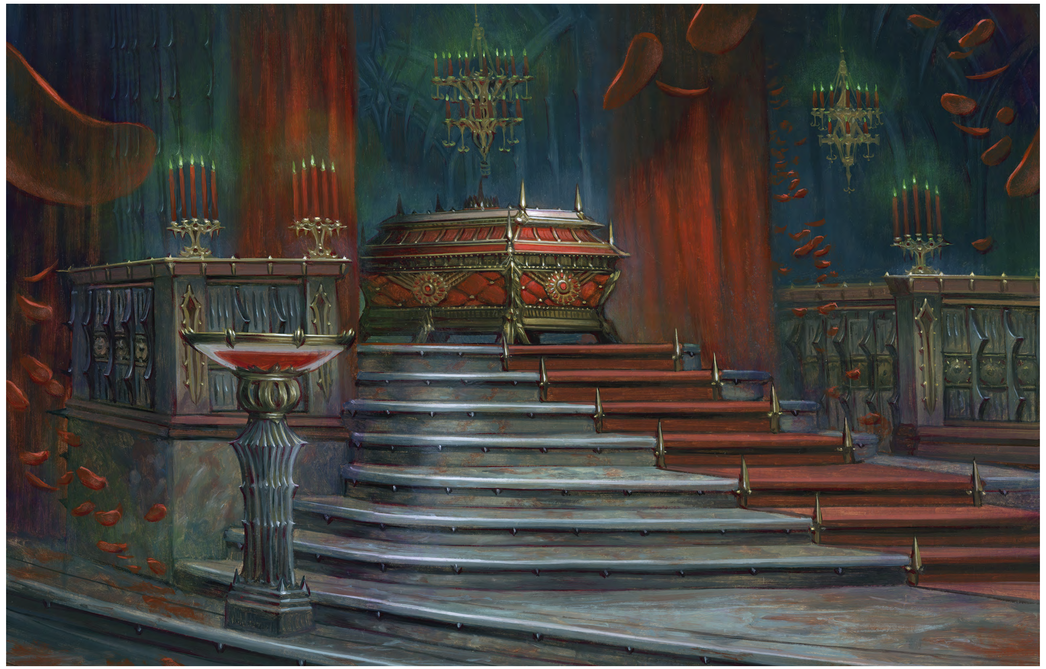
"What you're doing is madness."

"Madness? Oh, my dear boy, this is the wisest thing I've ever done," she answers.

The daggers shift then, the crowd's attention now on Olivia. With a small flourish she rakes the knife across her arm. Old blood, potent blood, blood dark as the night around them, drips onto Edgar Markov's coffin.

The red chandelier above, the red carpets below, joined by the woman in her red wedding dress, the red blood on the white slab coffin.

Each drip makes him angrier. Every instant that woman's foul blood runs along the carvings of his family histories is an insult. *His grandfather*—his grandfather, who created everything these people so value! His grandfather, who created them!—used as a simple political tool.



*"Edgar Markov's Coffin", by Volkan Baga.*

He knows what is going to happen. The grooves run all the way to the inner workings of the coffin. Any moment now that woman's blood will drip onto his grandfather's lips. The rush of it will leave him overwhelmed—and, worse, her own memories and emotions will mingle with his.

Sorin was so careful whenever he woke his grandfather. He'd wait and wait until his own storm of emotions had settled, he'd keep his mind trained on pleasant memories, he'd do whatever was necessary to see that his grandfather woke up comfortably. To wake from slumber is a frightening thing, much as no one wants to admit it.



And now his grandfather is going to wake tasting that woman's blood, thick with ambition, surrounded on all sides by these *insects* . . .

It is, in the end, a childish thought. Perhaps the most childish thought he's ever had—and certainly the most childish thought he's had in recent memory.

But it is there at the core of all this, a single thought that echoes and echoes.

He doesn't want to lose his grandfather.

He doesn't want to see his grandfather get hurt.

In all the planes no one had known him longer. No one knew the story of his life so well, from his childhood to his ascendancy, his failures and his triumphs.

No one else remembered anymore. All the others were dead.

The realization is the flame, his rage the powder. The instant he has the thought is the instant everything changes. Caution's incinerated by the explosion.

Sorin charges ahead.

The guards are there to meet him, four standing with spears interlinked. Mice before cats have more hope of survival. When Sorin pounces on one, he tears out their throat before the two of them even hit the ground. Two

of the others he freezes in place, their blood stopping in their bodies. He readies to leap again, toward Olivia—

But in his haste he's forgotten the last man.

A thick, heavy chain around his neck chokes his progress, yanking him backward like a collared dog. If he can go just one more step, he could stop Olivia in place, stop this whole ritual—

But the guard drags him one step back, his feet tripping over the bodies.

Sorin snarls. His eyes lock on the sight in front of him: the coffin, the blood, Olivia's smiling face.

One . . . more . . . step . . .

Another guard joins the first, another Blessed Silver chain around his chest.

He strains forward.

A third guard. A fourth. More and more pile on, faster than his magic can work on them, faster than he can stop them.

All he can do is try to reach them—and watch.

Watch as the coffin slides open and his grandfather emerges from within. Edgar Markov does not survey the gathered crowd, nor his restrained grandson—he has eyes only for Olivia Voldaren.



He smiles at her.

Sorin strains to remember his grandfather smiling like this before now. It's beatific, pure, and all the more horrifying for that. He's smiling like a *child*.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and Sorin," Olivia announces, "I present to you my handsome, perfect betrothed: Lord Edgar Markov."

He takes her hand. For long, horrible moments, he drinks the blood from her wrist. Only after this does he rise from the coffin.

Done with his meal, he dabs at his face with a handkerchief. Now he turns to face the crowd, now he takes in the sight.



*"Edgar's Awakening", by Joshua Raphael.*

"Grandfather!" Sorin shouts. "Grandfather, she's controlling you—"

It is only then that Edgar regards him, and only as a man might regard his unruly pet. The smile from only moments ago sags into sympathy. "Sorin, please. You're ruining the festivities."

"The festivities?" Sorin repeats. He can't think of anything else to say. There was a small hope tucked away within him—a hope he hadn't even acknowledged—that Olivia's charms might fail to ensorcell his grandfather. Could it truly be so easy as this?

His grandfather shows no signs of changing course. Olivia snaps her fingers; a host of thralls spring to action. Like spiders weaving a web they swirl about him, helping him piece by piece into his wedding finery.

Sorin's stomach sinks. He realizes, faintly, that the guards have stopped holding him back. He could move now, if he wanted.

But he can't summon the strength.

Not as Olivia takes his grandfather's arm, not as the guests smile at him.

"Why the long face? It isn't as if you'll be alone on the groom's side," Olivia says.

He's too worn down to dignify it with a response.

But she makes good on her word—he won't be.



There are other coffins. He has so many relatives; it'd be impossible to store them all at Markov manor. Many slumbered on their own properties.

And they hadn't escaped Olivia's notice.

Olivia flits from one coffin to the other like a mad honeybee. A few drops is all it takes to start the process of waking the ancients. Somehow, despite Edgar being her promised husband, she never seems to take her eyes off Sorin.

He wonders how much she knows. He wonders if she's picked them out by hand, the ancestors he most detested. He suspects that she has. It wouldn't be a difficult thing to do—he's rarely seen eye to eye with the rest of his family.

He isn't sure when it happens, but it does, perhaps by the time his third aunt wakes from her slumber to sneer at him.

Sorin Markov looks away.

One by one, his family passes him by. One by one they kiss his cheeks and demand he does the same. All the while they say nothing, for there is nothing to be said.

There's a wedding on, after all, and talking with Sorin always ruined the mood in Markov Manor.

# EPISODE III
# Forever Hold Your Peace

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SORIN CHAFES AS OLIVIA PRESENTS HIS GRANDFATHER
WITH AN UNCONVENTIONAL WEDDING PRESENT,
BUT HER BINDING SPELL GOES AWRY
WHEN AN UNINVITED GUEST APPEARS.

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Stained glass windows aren't made overnight.

To make them, you must first decide what you are making—and how to make it. That alone can take the better part of months, particularly if the glazier and an artist are working together. Broad shapes and silhouettes are taken into consideration, but so too are the smaller shards tucked here and there to dazzle the eye. How many feathers upon the wings of an angel? How many scales upon the head of the serpent? How many fangs, gleaming in the treacherous light? The larger picture, the details—you must have all of them laid out before you. You must understand what you are going to make before you've even begun.

Then you must begin it.

Here there are also long hours, long weeks, long months. Each feather, each scale, each fang must come from a new piece of glass colored specifically for the purpose. You'll use a blazing hot iron to cut the pieces apart, hoping as you go that no piece cracks before its time. One by one, piece by piece, you and your underlings whiling your lives away.

Even when you have all your pieces cut—perfectly rounded, sheared to size shard by shard—you are not yet done. Stained glass is too weak to stand alone. You must cohere them into parts, which then cohere into a whole. Break the beautiful work you've made into panels: feathers, scales, fangs, all in their own spaces. Mount these onto iron, and at last, you've created your work.

If you are lucky it will last a few centuries before someone flings an angel through it.

Sorin's seen many stained glass windows in his time. He's commissioned a few himself. The process always fascinated him. Like architecture, its frequent companion, it's the work of centuries—something only he and others like him are positioned to appreciate.

It is not the first time he has seen the window before him, but in this hanging-raindrop moment, he has the time to appreciate it. At its apex is Olivia Voldaren, smiling with glee, two tipped goblets of blood acting as the frame for the rest of the window. How long had it taken to complete this monument to Oliva's ego? How many arduous hours were spent shaping every curve of her lips, every jewel, every eyelash?



Where the other families take opportunities like this to highlight their scions, Olivia seizes the lion's share of attention for herself. Oh, there are others sprinkled here and there—feather, scale, and tooth—but she reigns supreme throughout. From her presence at the top to her portrait in the center . . .

. . . to her standing now at the base of the window, arm in arm with Edgar Markov.



*"Edgar, Charmed Groom", by Volkan Baga.*

They made an achingly regal picture—she with her train of sorrowful spirits, he in his wedding finery. He realizes, looking at them, that these are details. His gathered relatives, looking on him with indifference; the wedding guests, as thirsty for drama as they are for blood; his plundered grandfather. One thing has led to the other, one panel into the next: vampires run rampant, he creates the angel, the angel perishes, he is humiliated, Olivia fills the void of power he's left behind.

As she sips from a chalice of blood, as she points to him with a smirk on her lip, her eyes seem to say that it could have been anything. Any sign of weakness would have been enough. Any disaster befalling Innistrad would have opened enough space for her. The woman sought power the way plants sought light.

The larger picture of Olivia's life has always marched toward this.

"Welcome, welcome! Oh, it's such a delight to have so many guests. I simply couldn't have a wedding with an empty groom's side. It'd be so garish."

The way his grandfather dotingly pats her hand makes him want to scream. Edgar Markov hardly had words for his first wife when they were alive. That he would show such kindness to this woman . . .

A chorus of polite laughter from his extended family. They do not look at him, but he feels their derision all the same, like daggers at his throat.



"Now, I'm sure you're all honored to be here, and *dying* to get to the main event. But I hope you'll forgive me; I have a little something else planned first. A little amuse-bouche, if you will, and a present for my dear Edgar. Thralls!"

She snaps her fingers.

At first, he thinks nothing is happening. A small flicker of hope shines somewhere within him that her thralls have finally turned against her.

But she extinguishes this, too, as easily as breathing. Catching his eye, she points upward.

The chandelier? A work of art no less impressive than the stained glass, but what was so special about it? From the look on her face whatever she had in store was . . .

There is something else lashed to the ceiling of the Grand Hall.

*Something* sinks lower, draped in rich red curtains. The shape reminds him of a birdcage, and he wonders if she's made someone stitch her an abomination as a gift. Given her predilection for torturing the faithful, she might have torn the wings from an angel and attached them to a choir singer. *Behold, a songbird.*

But as the birdcage descends a familiar scent comes to him—angel blood. With it comes a memory: his grandfather, Markov manor, a gath-

ered crowd of his family and their closest confidants. A fear that gripped him by the spine; the weight of expectations like stocks across his shoulders. His grandfather looking on him with pride. A cup in his hands, filled with blood.

*Drink and be eternal.*

He didn't want to drink. The wretched smell of the stuff stained his palate with copper. And there was the angel, too, chained upside down like . . .

Like a bird.

That day—years ago, centuries—she was still writhing. Her eyes met Sorin's not long after his grandfather's, her plea just as impassioned: *Do not drink. Save me.*

Time has washed away much of his memory, but her whimpering, the smell of her blood, the look on her face as his grandfather forced him to drink—these things stand like mountains against the ceaseless tides.

He knows what he is going to see before the curtains drop to the floor.

He does not avert his eyes.

There is no cage save Sigarda's own wings, bloodied and battered, pressed so tight against her that she cannot move. Red ribbons serve to bind her instead, a mockery of her considerable strength. She does not



hang upside down—but she is no more comfortable than her predecessor had been. However powerful the magic, it is difficult to stamp out an angel's spirit; he had learned this firsthand. Sigarda's struggling still.

And when she looks to him from within her feathered prison it is with the same pleading look he remembered. A new face does not dull its blade. His chest aches, his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. *Drink and be eternal,* his grandfather had said. But was this what they'd been striving for all these years? To repeat history?



*"Sigarda's Imprisonment", by Bryan Sola.*

Another thought follows: Olivia can't have brought Sigarda here solely to serve as a gift.

The blood dripping from the angel's wounds calls to him. He knows it calls to them, too; he knows his grandfather is also a talented blood mage.

Sorin's sorting through the possibilities faster than he can consciously follow, his instincts a sieve for his waking mind. If a ritual like this one was enough to convert his immediate family to vampirism, then this one . . .

Well, it was simple, wasn't it? If you controlled a man's blood, you controlled him. If you controlled an angel's blood, you controlled her. Granted, you'd have to be an elder vampire to handle that much power, but . . . if you drank that blood, made it a part of you, then you might well control angels, too. Assuming you lived.

The *idea* is a simple one; to put it into practice less so. Sigarda being one of the oldest angels did much to help. But they'd need something else, something to bind the blood to its drinkers, something just as old and powerful. Ideally crafted of Moonsilver—he's never found a finer vessel for magical energy. Even Eldrazi weren't immune.

Something like the Moonsilver Key Arlinn and the others were looking for.

The Moonsilver Key Olivia now held in her hands, looking for all the world like an offering bowl. The Sungold Lock was much the same; together, the two formed a sphere. Sorin watches in horror as his grandfather joins his hands to hers. Together, they hold the Key to domination.



Olivia Voldaren with control over all the angels in Innistrad. Eternal night hardly mattered in comparison. Innistrad could endure much—but it could not endure this.

Anger and fear seize him. He fights against his restraints, but the chains only dig in deeper against his flesh. A fell procession of vampires dressed as Avacynian priests approaches. One—his high hat marking him as a Lunarch—takes his place behind the couple.

Must everything here be an insult to him?

Again the eyes of the crowd are upon him, again they point to him, again they watch to see what he will do.

*Drink and be eternal,* his grandfather said to him. As if he had any choice in the matter. As if he had wanted to be eternal.

"If you continue to decline our invitations, Sorin, we're going to stop sending them," wrote one of his aunts. As if her soirees were the most important thing in the Multiverse.

"Has it ever occurred to you that you're no fun at all?" This from an uncle years ago—an uncle he sees now flanked by two women while he

bleeds a slender young thrall. He laps at the blood like a cat lapping at milk. This is what he thinks of as fun.

There is an *angel* hanging from the ceiling and that man can only think of passing pleasures.

Torments upon torments.

Olivia hands the false priest a piece of vellum. He has the temerity to read it in a reedy, mocking voice.

"Beloved guests, you have come here today to participate in the most sacred ritual on Innistrad. It is said that herons mate for life. For those such as we, eternal and unchanging, such a promise reaches beyond mortal understanding. The Lady of our most illustrious house, Olivia Voldaren, has pledged her heart to Edgar Markov and he, his undying affections to her. I understand Sorin Markov has brought his grandfather here to be married?"

"I've done *no* such thing!" Sorin protests, struggling again. The guards yank him backward. Worse—the crowd laughs.

"Don't mind the boy," says Edgar. "You know how he is at parties."

"No sense for hospitality," echoes Olivia.

The priest smirks. "Very well. Now. The two of you can speak your vows to one another, if you've prepared them."



He doesn't ask who will go first. Olivia speaks the very moment his tongue rests.

"Edgar. Darling Edgar. We met so many centuries ago I've long forgotten the occasion—but I remember the moment I realized we should be together like it was yesterday. Sorin left your coffin unguarded, and I thought to myself, what a fool to leave a man like that unattended. You're in my care now, and together, we'll rule Innistrad. I promise I'll always consider your opinions for at least a moment before rejecting them, Edgar. I promise to overlook your sartorial missteps. And I promise to grant you the honor of being my husband."

"Thank you, Most Illustrious Lady Voldaren, those vows brought tears to my eyes," says the priest, who has likely not cried in centuries. "Lord Markov, your vows?"

Sorin snarls. The guards restraining him advance in lockstep. Momentum alone carries him closer to the altar. As one, they fling him upon the steps. He lands like a Thraben beggar upon the marble. There are only two chains now: one pulling his shoulders backward out of their sockets and binding together his arms, another coiled about his throat.

He forces himself to his feet. The chain threatens to crush his windpipe. No matter. He'd endure that. He'll endure anything if it means he can tear Olivia Voldaren's head from her body.

To see her smiling down on him like this . . .

Thousands of years ago, Edgar Markov made the most important decision of Sorin's life for him.

Tonight, Sorin repays the favor.

Woodcutter, blacksmith, werewolf, vampire, angel—blood is blood.

He calls to the darkness in the bowl, and it answers him. A blade of red-black slices through the chains as easily as any sword. Momentum sends the bowl tumbling out of their joined hands.

Blood stains his shirt, his skin, his hands—but he stands unyielding before them.

"I object."

"Sorin," says Olivia, baring her fangs, "you're ruining my *special day*."

...

"So I just have a question," says Chandra.

Arlinn smirks. Standing outside the gates, they've had little in the way of things to do. A new set of guards replaced the old, but they're no more talkative. "What's on your mind?"

"It's a vampire wedding, right?"





*"Arterial Alchemy", by Caio Montero.*

"Right," says Kaya, sensing danger. "A vampire wedding."

"Do you think there's cake in there?"

Adeline half-groans, half-laughs. Kaya pinches the bridge of her nose. Teferi's shoulders rise and fall with his quiet chuckles.

Arlinn thinks for a moment. "There has to be, right? For the thralls?"

"I can't imagine they feed their servants, no," Kaya says. "Teferi, have you ever been to one of these before?"

"Not a vampire wedding, no, but . . ."

"Something similar?" Adeline asks.

"Something similar," Teferi says. He rubs at his chin, then shrugs with a smile. "But, that's the thing about weddings. No matter the traditions, some things stay the same. They're all about bringing people together."

"Even with vampires?" asks Chandra.

Teferi nods. "Even vampires."

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad when they got in.

Until then, they'd have to keep freezing their toes off.

...

His preternatural senses alert him to the incoming thrust a split second before it would have taken his head. A golden spear comes into view from behind him. What a dirty trick, to catch him like this. But perhaps a gift in disguise—he is going to need a weapon, after all. He snaps the spearhead off its shaft, then pulls. Before the spearman can recover his balance, Sorin wheels around, driving the sharpened blade into the recess of the man's armpit. Bone grinds against metal. It doesn't stop the spearman—but Sorin's magic does. A single held glance is enough to freeze him in place.



And turn him into a shield.

Guards rarely work alone. This one is no exception. A swordsman is next to try his luck, his weapon heavier than anything a human could manage. A wicked, animal grunt heralds the crunch of impact against his captive's armor. Sorin raises a brow. What *was* that thing? More cudgel than blade. If Sorin had a say in the matter he'd pick something with better balance.

But he doesn't have any say in the matter—they took his sword from him when they chained him.

This will have to do.

He hurls the bleeding captive toward the swordsman. In an unnatural instant he's behind the swordsman; another sees him snapping the man's neck. Sorin tears the sword away. Yes, the weight is all wrong, and no wonder—it's thick as his hand and encrusted with gold.

Disgusting.

Truly disgusting.

Which means it's the perfect weapon to kill Olivia.

Three more fall in quick succession, crushed beneath the weight of the new weapon. He doesn't pay them much attention. His captors don't matter anymore—only the woman in charge.

Five more guards are closing in. He has time for one cut. It isn't going to be a beautiful one, not with this behemoth. Still, nothing else matters—not what might happen after this, not the Moonsilver Key, not the Eternal night, and not the abject horror on his grandfather's face.

This is far more personal.

Olivia knows it, too; the instant they lock eyes she grips the Key tighter than ever, as if the power locked within it might save her.

Sorin raises the sword.

Muscle and weight carry it on its dread arc downward, closer and closer to Olivia's flying form. No matter. He's stepping into the swing enough to make up the distance. He's going to end this here and now—

At least, he'd like to.

A flash of light throws him off. The starburst tip of the blade grazes Olivia's chiffon gown and gloves. Grasping for the now-falling Key, Olivia is furious. Even more so when it lands out of her grasp.

"Attacking a bride on her wedding day! I knew you were gauche, but this! We'll need to construct a whole new *word* for how gauche this is," she sneers down at him.

His grandfather's hand lands on his shoulder.



"Sorin, this is more important than you could ever imagine. We need this. The Key—my word, what is *that?*"

He doesn't have to look away to see it: right below Olivia's feet, the Moonsilver Key glows with an unnatural light.

There, at the altar: a geist of some sort bursting from the Key. No—not a geist; something else. He's seen things like this on other planes—this is someone's spirit, separated from their body. A witch, by the shape of her headdress.



*"Katilda, Dawnhart Martyr", by Miguel Castañón.*

"Who invited *you?*" Olivia snaps.

The spirit turns toward her. Brows knit over spectral eyes. "You did."

Ghostly flowers entwine about the witch's arm. They grow, blossom, and die all in an instant. The spirit studies this with some interest. A simple gesture and vines join the flowers. In only a few seconds she's grown herself a staff—one whose many branches glow with purpose.

She looks toward the angel hanging in the center of the room like a Harvesttide decoration. Disgust and horror mingle on her face. Understanding replaces it and her burning eyes alight on Olivia Voldaren. "You would stoop so low as this?"

Edgar's grip tightens on Sorin's shoulder, but his words only drive a further wedge between them. "Olivia, you must stop her!"

Sorin shoves his grandfather aside. He tells himself that it isn't really Edgar talking, as if that will make it hurt less somehow. Still, one thing is clear: if Olivia has to stop the spirit, then he has to stop Olivia. With all the speed he can muster he dashes between her and the Key, meeting her head-on charge with a wild slash. Even the bite of the blade on her outstretched arms isn't enough to stop her—she keeps coming. He keeps fighting back. Sorin throws his weight toward her, a crude shove, anything to buy the spirit the time it needs.



A bolt of soft, verdant light over his shoulder tells him he's successful.

Olivia's claws rake his cheek, then dig in, holding his face in a bizarre parody of a loving stepmother. The fire burning in her eyes is going to be hard to extinguish. Whatever that spirit's up to, it better be good.

But he hears something then, a sound that fills him with hope even as it dredges up horrible memories of his mortal life.

The holy flutter of an angel's wings.

He doesn't know what's coming, not exactly. But he has an idea. That bolt from earlier must have cleansed the bindings keeping Sigarda in place. Sorin smiles right back in Olivia's face. It's worth the pain of her nails digging in deeper.

"I think your little party's over," he says.

And he watches, delighted, as her eyes leave his to regard something behind him.

Sorin throws her away, turning to face the rising angel.

Making an angel is much like making stained glass: you have to know what she will be before you can begin.

Sorin did not make Sigarda—but he knew her. And in the days before he made Avacyn—the days when he realized this was the solution he'd

spent so much time seeking—he studied her. Where Bruna was thoughtful and reserved to a fault, Sigarda never let the perfect become the enemy of the good. She acted when she knew who was on the side of good, and who on the side of evil. Yet she had none of Gisela's bluster, none of her fire-and-brimstone approach to the sinners. The iron framework keeping Sigarda together was an unabashed love of humankind.

He had wanted the same for Avacyn. Or at least a simulacrum of that love, if he could not recreate it himself.

Oh, there were differences. Sigarda felt too deeply, for instance, often offering mercy where ruthlessness might have better served the people of Innistrad. She was too emotional, he thought. That got in the way of her executing her duties.

But looking at her now, framed by the Voldaren's stained glass window, Sorin realizes it's better that he *didn't* make Sigarda.

He never would have imbued her with this much righteous wrath.

Blood streaks her wings, the air around her shimmering with golden energy. Every cut he dealt her in their fight weeps anew. But there are more, too, and he wonders just how it was that Olivia captured her. Whatever happened, they're about to be repaid tenfold. She looks down upon the congregated masses with pure, unbridled disdain. Even the oldest of the vampires quiets at the sight of her—a new symbol for something they once feared.



Sigarda spreads her wings. A shock of white energy forms around her.

"All of you are guilty," speaks the angel.

Sorin takes a breath.

It isn't enough to prepare him for what comes next.

She's bright as the dawn, bright as alabaster, bright as hope—too bright to behold.

Holy light blazes against his eyes.

The stained glass behind her took years to bring to fruition. So, too, the panels that line the walls. How many months, how many years, how many lives went into the chandelier over their heads? It is impossible to know. Even he cannot fathom the collected years of labor represented by Olivia's twisted collection.

All of it—every year, every month, every hour—shatters in an instant.

The light dazzles him, but he can see the cracks as they form, veins of fire against the glass. He can't bring himself to look away even as the light sears him. There is something beautiful in all this: the larger shards, each a mirror, reflecting the eternal between them; the smaller shards, deadly snow; droplets of blood, a blasphemous rain upon the congregation.

And then the force hits them.

Chaos erupts like a spear through the Voldaren manor.

An explosion of energy throws him off his feet. Before he knows what's happening he's flung into a fountain of blood—and he is one of the lucky ones. Sangromancy allows him to make a shield from the falling blood to protect him from the incoming shards. Not everyone else has the skill. All around him there are partygoers like pincushions.

Sorin stands among them.



*"Sanctify", by Kasia 'Kafis' Zielinska.*



In that moment, he notices two things: first, that Olivia and his grandfather are, unfortunately, mostly unharmed; second, the glass is not the only thing that's shattered.

...

Chandra has a thousand questions. Adeline has five hundred answers, about two hundred guesses, and figures the others can make up the rest. Outside of Voldaren Manor she perches her head on her hand and watches Chandra talk. No matter how awful the circumstances, no matter how vile the place only a stone's throw away, the light in Chandra's eyes is beautiful.

And it's because she's looking so closely that Adeline sees it: a new light, bright gold, one that gilds Chandra's cheeks.

It looks almost. . .angelic.

"Wait. Wait, what's that?"

Adeline looks over toward the manor. The light's coming from inside the building.

The invitation wards are crumbling.

Chandra grins. "Looks like the party's getting started."

# EPISODE IV
# The Wedding Crashers

A COMBINED FORCE OF CATHARS, ANGELS, AND PLANESWALKERS STORM THE ESTATE TO RECLAIM THE MOONSILVER KEY WHILE SORIN CONFRONTS HIS GRANDFATHER.

A spear of light shatters the windows of Voldaren Manor. Invitation wards crumble, scattering ash-like on the winds. The air in Stensia is bright and clear for the first time in what feels like months, as clear as the goals of the gathered hopefuls.

Tonight, they break down the doors of this awful castle. Tonight, they fight tooth, nail, claw, and sword to take back the day.

Arlinn can't give the order fast enough. The moment she sees the angelic plume of light, she shouts to the others, "Now!"

But they are already moving, holiness gilding them like saints, swords raised, and stallions rearing. Adeline is ahead of the pack, Chandra sitting behind her; Teferi hastens the footsteps of the surrounding foot sol-



*"Sigarda's Summons", by Nestor Ossandon Leal.*

diers as much as he can. The guards at the gates stand no chance against the gathered masses. Arlinn doesn't see who takes them down, only the lances piercing their chests, but she does taste their blood on the wind.

Her senses sharpen. She sees beyond the gates: to the narrow walkway, trailing thin as thread above the abyss; to the manor's sick tapestry. All of it will be torn down. The thought's a satisfying one. It was like her mother always used to say—didn't matter how nice the pie looked, if you



filled it with hot fish, it'd still taste rotten. And vampires left a rotten taste in everything they touched.

Kaya's hand on her shoulder brings her back to the present moment—to the reality of it, instead of Arlinn's far-flung musings. "We've got to get going," she says. "Otherwise, there isn't gonna be much left for us."

She's right. Arlinn's learned that Kaya's right about a lot of things. After all of this is over she hopes the two of them can get to know each other better; Kaya, out of all the other Planeswalkers, understood the delicate balance of life and death that so characterized Innistrad. And understanding Innistrad meant understanding Arlinn.

"Try to keep up," she says, smiling.

Kaya rolls her eyes—but she doesn't back down.

The two of them join the crowd: cathars mounted and unmounted, priests bearing herons and priests bearing Avacynian collars, and farmers who have lost their families.

Onward across the bridge, toward that den of depravity, the rush of the living and the mortal.

Onward the lances, onward the hammers and shields, torches and pitchforks, the holy tomes and blessed blades.

And downward come the bats. Distant, at first, easily mistaken for pieces of falling ash, but the sound soon drowns out that hope. Screeching pierces her sensitive ears; Arlinn covers one and tucks the other against her shoulder to try and block out the cacophony. It's no use.

But what is useful are the bolts of magic hurled over her shoulder. Arrows, too, soon find their marks. As the bats descend, hungry for blood, the witches and archers are eager to meet them. Fur sizzles; the screeching worsens—and then goes silent. Her ears are still ringing as the bats go down. She can't hear the crunch of their bones beneath the boots of their makeshift army, but she can feel it.

She can feel the shift beneath her, too, as they move from simple stone to carefully curated marble. Up ahead, at the secondary gates, the guards have already been overwhelmed, floating face down in pools of blood. Maybe Kaya's right. If they aren't quick, there's hardly going to be anything left.

But even a crowd of this size has trouble with gates.

Kaya and Arlinn make their way through the crowd. It's easy enough—many part for their erstwhile leader and her comrade in arms. Adeline, Teferi, and Chandra make up the vanguard standing before the great doors.

Teferi tilts his head up, then shakes his head with a sigh. "Awful taste."



"That's why we should light the whole thing on fire," Chandra says.

"You mean the door, don't you?" Adeline asks.

Chandra looks back toward her, smile straining. "Right . . . just the door."

Flames spiral around her arms. Full of swagger she advances, holding out her hands before her.

Arlinn has half a mind to stop her. Fire's hard to deal with, after all, and while it's harmful to vampires it's harmful to their group, too.

But Avacyn preserve her, she just can't be mad about it. There's something satisfying watching Olivia's smug face burn.

Teferi taps his staff against the ground. As amused as he is by the sight, they don't have much time to waste. The fire burns hotter, brighter, and faster—and soon the door before them is only ash.

This is where the real assault begins.

All of Voldaren Manor is open before them. Arlinn's never been, personally, but she's heard the stories. One wrong turn and you'll never be heard from again. But that only applied if you wandered in alone.

Arlinn always traveled with a pack. A pang of sadness follows the thought. Streak, Boulder, Patience, and Redtooth. If she tried she could

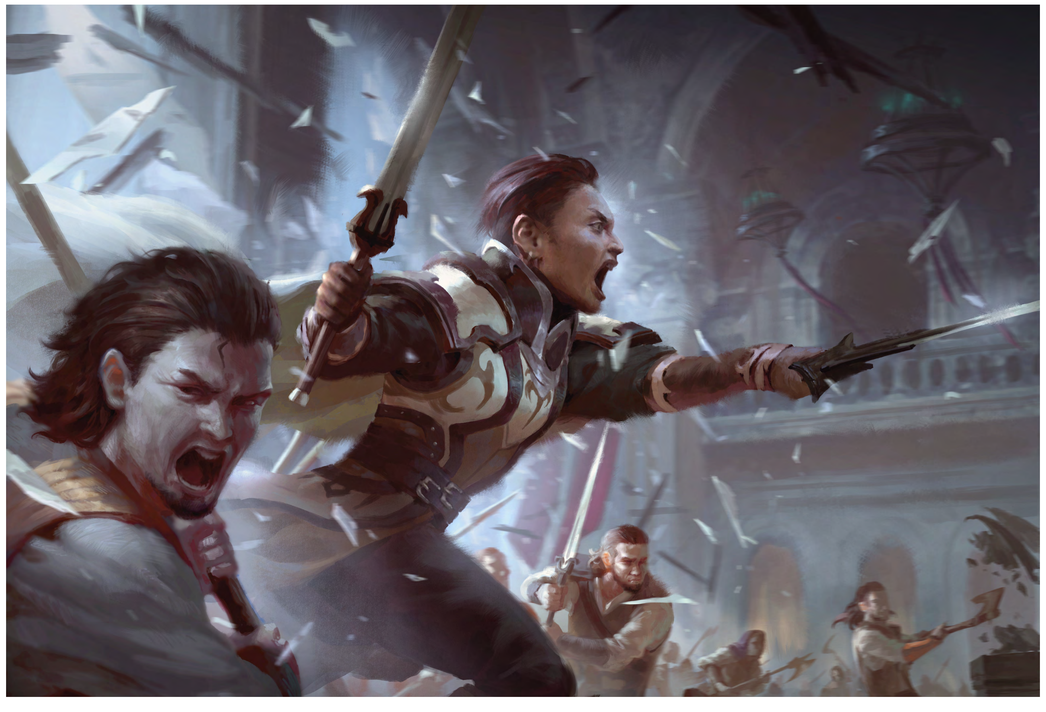
imagine where they might be right now—somewhere with springy earth beneath their paws. Somewhere that smelled of pine.

She feels alone.

She knows she isn't.

The light up ahead is proof of that.

Mounted cathars break off from the crowd, taking to the courtyards and gardens, swords and lances ready to mete out justice. Chandra and Ade-



*"Resistance Squad", by Joshua Raphael.*



line go with them, Adeline mounting her charger before helping Chandra up behind her.

Ranks of guards armed with golden weapons come to meet their charge, their armor more ornamental than functional. Arrows and bolts crash into the first line of defense: farmers with makeshift shields, old soldiers standing next to them. A return volley soon follows. Arlinn picks up a bow and lets loose herself. Hard to see where her arrow lands in all the chaos, but someone's hitting the enemy.

"Didn't know you were such a good shot," Kaya says.

Arlinn glances toward her. Kaya's eyes are gleaming a faint silver. There's a strange taste on Arlinn's tongue, and a high-pitched sound she can't seem to place.

"Can't always use my teeth to hunt," says Arlinn. "Everything all right?"

A javelin comes their way, soaring right through Kaya and clattering uselessly against a beheaded statue. "There are spirits here, Arlinn. And they're *very* angry."

Arlinn finds herself grinning. "Good. Think you can get them to help us out?"

"I'll see about cutting them loose," Kaya says. She returns the smile—but something else catches her attention. She looks toward the light. "Wait. I don't think I'm alone. There's someone else calling out to me."

Arlinn looks over her shoulder. The light must be coming from the ballroom; the hallways open up not too far down. And those guards have got to be coming from somewhere.

Just what was going on in there?

"Who?"

"I think . . . I think it's Katilda."

Warmth in Arlinn's chest, as fortifying as her favorite ale. "Even better."

Kaya nods. "You keep going on ahead. I'll see about our backup. It's time the Voldarens paid their debts."

And, just like the ghosts, Arlinn doesn't need to be told twice. She trusts Kaya. She trusts Teferi. She trusts Chandra and Adeline. And—Avacyn's mercy—she trusts Sorin, too. When the time comes to save Innistrad he'll do the right thing, she's sure of it.

It's only that she wants to be there just in case.

The guards are in ragged shape to begin with. Fighting them is hard work—fighting vampires always is—but easier than it should be. Vibrant



shards of glass jut from their pallid skin; their balance is so far off that Arlinn hardly takes a single blow making her way through them. Blood slicks the marbled floors of Voldaren Manor—and this time it belongs to the leeches themselves.

It isn't just the vampires themselves that fall.

It's the statues, toppled over; polished stone made jagged.

It's the fountains of blood, smashed apart; priests working in tandem to purify the tainted.

It's the tapestries, the chandeliers, the fine carpets and the extravagant furniture. A fiery anger burns in the heart of Innistrad. The shouts echoing down the hallway aren't simple war cries—they're more than that. A howl of agony, an affirmation of life, the cathartic wail of a people who have lived in fear for far too long.

Vampires built this place on the backs of mortals.

Mortals will tear it asunder.

By the time they break through to the ballroom, Arlinn feels that righteous anger within her, too. Her inner beast struggles against its leash. Tovolar would tell her to set it loose upon these bloodsuckers.

She doesn't *want* to agree with him.

Not yet.

But she nearly loses control when she breaks through to the ballroom.

To see Sigarda's bloodied wings, to see the fervor consuming her as her sickle reaps vampiric heads—Arlinn isn't sure what to think. It's a sight as grisly as it is invigorating. A coppery taste sticks to the roof of Arlinn's mouth. The Church could be as bloody as any werewolf pack.

And there are the others, too: more guards, some bold enough to attack Sigarda directly; the partygoers going bestial at the sight of the intruders. As she scans the room for the Key—and for Sorin—there's almost too much to take in. Torn gowns, bats swirling in the air along with petals of blood, the shattered stained glass window, fountains torn and buffet tables broken in two.

It's not getting easier anytime soon.

But she has to get through them somehow.

Ahead, ducking beneath the swing of a blade, tearing through silk and lace to claw at her attacker: a hopped-up Markov duelist. She's fought his type before. Fancy swordplay gets you lots of places, but Arlinn doesn't need a sword to fight.

The blood gushing down his side doesn't slow him, not yet. Must have glutted himself before all this started—he smells of many lives mingled together, his lips smeared thick with red. "No one invited the *fashion disasters*."



His next cut is fast. If he was attacking anyone else it might even have been too fast to follow. But Arlinn's not alone, and the waves of magic slowing the blow down speak to that. She has enough time to drive her knee into his stomach. The vampire gurgles as the air's knocked out of him; his sword clatters to the ground.

She could kill him. Tear his throat out. He'd deserve it, all the things he must have done. A vampire's existence necessitates the suffering of others.

But that's what Tovolar would do.

Arlinn hefts him overhead and hurls him into a column.

If he has any sense he won't come after her again.

She doesn't have time to see if he will. Through the melee again, trying her best to cast aside the memories of Harvesttide. This won't be the same. It can't be.

The best way to stop all this is to find the Key. But where is it? She sniffs at the air, hoping to get the scent, but there's too much magic to make any sense of it. Sigarda's, likely—it's coming off her in waves as she fights off the lion's share of guards.

Arlinn's eyes will have to serve instead.

The second she spots Olivia, the cavalry arrives. Cathars break in through the windows, their warhorses stained red. Bolts of magic shoot straight for the progenitor vampire as some of the priests follow.

And when the priests see who's in the ballroom with them, a chorus of cheers rises.

Olivia's not cheering. "You . . . all of you! You're ruining my *wedding day*!" she roars from atop the stairs.

"Hand over the Key!" Arlinn answers. A hundred voices echo her— *the Key, the Key!*

So many that the walls start to shake.

*The Key, the Key, the ki. . .ki. . .kill.*

Wait. Those aren't just the army's voices. And the humming in the air—something's happening. All around them the air itself coalesces into something else. Something old.

Geists. Arlinn can see their shapes now: servants and knights, nobles and farmers. There must be hundreds of them, all materializing at once, ghostly flames alight with anger.

*You killed us.*



The voices of the dead carry well.

Their weapons, she's relieved to see, do too. Like a wave of spectral force the geists crash against their former oppressors. And among the crowd a familiar headdress stands out: Katilda. Arlinn doesn't need to be told to follow her—the path ahead glows a faint green, like moss on full moon nights.

Arlinn charges up the steps.

Olivia takes to the air—or tries to. She doesn't get very far before a familiar silhouette forms in the air behind her. Kaya plunges a spectral dagger into Olivia's fell train. Ordinary fabric would tear asunder. This magical fabric does, too—and, like blood from a wound, the geists trapped within the train burst free.

Olivia's scream is a hideous thing. She thrashes, sending Kaya tumbling. If she hits the tile there's going to be blood.

Arlinn can't take any chances. She leaps into the air, catching Kaya mid-fall, landing only an instant later. But that's long enough for Olivia to flee: Arlinn looks up just in time to spot her tattered train ducking into a hallway.

"Leave the fight to us," Kaya says. "Go."



*"Kaya, Geist Hunter", by Ryan Pancoast.*



Arlinn spares a glance over her shoulder—at the angels, the mortals, the immortals, and the ghosts. Somewhere in that din is Sorin. She can't catch sight of him here. She doesn't have time to search.

She nods. "Keep them safe."

It's a big ask, and she knows it is. People are going to die here today. She wishes they didn't have to.

But all Arlinn can do is make sure their sacrifices are worth it.

...

"It didn't have to be this way."

The slow, careful voice echoes in the chamber. Over the bubbling and boiling of blood it reigns supreme. Maybe that's because Sorin's spent so much time listening to it already. Once, it told him stories.

"You're right," he calls back. "Grandfather, you know this is foolish. She's only using you."

His own voice sounds strange here. The plaque outside read "Sanguitorium"—a ridiculous name, but an accurate one. This must be where the Voldarens kept their stores for lean times.

Not that there were ever lean times for the Voldarens.

When Sigarda took to the sky, Edgar scattered. He knew better than anyone an angel's wrath. Sorin followed. By then, Arlinn and her group had already breached the door. They'd handle getting the Key.

But no one else could confront Edgar Markov.

Now here they were, among the intricate vats of the Sanguitorium. Somewhere between these red columns his grandfather was waiting for him. Watching.

"Is that the way you're seeing things?"

Sorin flourishes the blade in his hand. "Sophistry? Grandfather, you're better than this."

He hears the blow coming a moment before it does: the shifting of Edgar's armor gives him away. Sorin sways to the right; Edgar swings a rack of bottles like a warhammer. They shatter the moment they make contact with the ground. There's nothing but contempt in Edgar's eyes when they meet.

Is this what the Markov line has come to? A deluded old man swinging furniture at his grandson?

"At least use a proper weapon!" Sorin snaps. The slash he unleashes at Edgar is a messy, wild thing.



And easily countered. Edgar catches Sorin's wrist, his fingers a vise. Pain shoots up Sorin's arms as the delicate bones of his forearm crack. "What do you know about propriety, Sorin? It isn't as if you've ever bothered to be part of the family."

Rather than wait for an answer, Edgar flings Sorin away. Sorin crashes into a vat; the wood cracks behind him. Blood spills out and onto his already sticky skin.

"Do you have any idea how much I've sacrificed for you?" Edgar says. He's advancing, crooking a finger toward Sorin as if he's lecturing a child. "How much we've *all* sacrificed for you?"

Sorin brings a cupped hand to his mouth. If he was going to be soaked in blood, he might as well make use of it. Better than listening to his grandfather's delusions. Olivia's control must have run deeper than he thought, if Edgar's saying things like this. They might not have always gotten along—but Edgar's never been a fool.

And yet.

These can't all be Olivia's words.

"As if I've never made a sacrifice for your sake," Sorin answers. The sword's out of the question now. As he gets to his feet, he grabs the first thing his hands close around—a length of pipe. Pulling it from its hous-

ing takes barely any effort with such potent blood coursing through his veins. Even better, more blood sprays over him.

Best to take advantage of this power. In a streak of speed, Sorin attacks. Edgar's armor groans and caves beneath the force of the blow; his ribs crack.

And yet he doesn't move away. The pained wheeze that leaves him sounds almost . . . amused.

"By all means, boy, tell me of your sacrifices," he says. "What have you given for House Markov? For Innistrad?"

"I created Avacyn—"

Edgar's choking hand stymies any response. There are alchemical fires behind those eyes, disgust in his sneering lip.

"Your little toy soldier? Yes, I'm aware. For the past thousand years you've spoken of little else. Even that was an idea you derived from *my* research. I wonder if you've ever had an original idea. For that matter, I wonder if any of your ideas have ever worked out for you."

As if he knows. As if he could ever possibly know the depths of Sorin's struggles.



Edgar lifts him up, one hand sufficient for the job. It's a mistake. Sorin swings the iron bar at Edgar's head. Red weeps from his grandfather's now-cracked skull; the old man drops his quarry and recoils in pain.

Something wells up inside Sorin.

There are other planes. There are other plans.

Again and again and again these words, a chorus echoing in his skull, a chant to summon a dark god. And yes, what it brings is dark indeed. Like the cry of an untethered beast his scream as he swings again, and again, his grandfather backing up further and further. Iron shatters glass. Waterfalls of blood spill onto the floor—blood that once ran in living veins, blood that once longed for more, blood that now longs to die.

"I thought you understood," Sorin rumbles. "I thought you saw, grandfather, that there is more to this existence than gluttonous parties and wanton excess. I thought you saw that!"

Again and again he swings, and swings, the iron bending now from his abuse. He sinks low to the ground—there is another pipe, far larger, that will serve. But the moment he reaches for it, Edgar lunges forward. His grandfather grabs him by the hair and by the waist, a farmer lifting an errant sheep.

"You are a child. You have always been a child," he intones. "It's truly a shame. Millennia ago I gave you a gift. Now I have to live out the rest of my days knowing you squandered it."

"I never asked for that—" Sorin begins.

"My dear boy, that is what makes it a *gift*."

Edgar swings him face first into a vat. Blood rushes up his nostrils—blood, and splintered wood.

Memory subsumes reality. He is a young man, called into his family's gathering hall. His grandfather sits at the head of the table. Lashed to the ceiling is an angel, her blood dripping into a wine glass.

Everyone is there. His aunts, his uncles. His parents. All of them lay their hands upon him and tell them this is for his own good. For the family's own good. If they're to survive in the dark, they must become a part of it. Famine has taken all the things that humans eat—so they should no longer be human. It's perfectly reasonable.

He's dizzy.

His head against the wood again, a shock of red across the memory.

"Innistrad is ours, Sorin," his grandfather says. He sounds older, somehow, wearier, and the words do not match the movements of his lips. "It's only right we rule it."



The world lurches around him. Something cuts at his throat; he can feel the blood rolling down to his collarbone. His heart hammers against his ribs.

"For too long you've let your bitterness, your paranoia, guide your actions. They've eaten away at your potential. Now all that remains is this sad, broken shell. A little boy, weeping for his grandfather."

Memory still blurs with the present. A hand on the back of his head. The wine glass before him. He does not want to drink, but they force him, the rim of the cup sharp against his gums.

The awful, exultant taste of blood. Warmth coursing through every vein of his body. A filthy feeling, from which he'll never be free, but which will, in time, become part of him. In time he will act as if he wanted this. In time, he will act as if this was always part of the plan. In time it will be insulting to him to be confused for a human.

For a mortal.

*"Drink and be eternal."*

He fell on that day. They all did. Some might say the Spark igniting within him was a saving grace. He felt otherwise. Sorin's never been a believer in grace, in religion—having manufactured one himself disabused him of any romantic notions. But he knows that it is true all the same: that day they fell.

So it is strange, then, that he feels as if he is falling now.

But when he opens his eyes it all makes perfect sense.

His grandfather stands on the lip of a great pit, looking down on him with disgust.

And Sorin Markov continues to fall.

...

History watches Arlinn race through the corridors of Voldaren Manor—but it isn't Arlinn's history. There's no traces of Avabruck here; no rough-wrought iron, no Avacynian symbols, no neighbors with stories older than the trees. Here, there are golden chandeliers; here, there is only the Voldaren's crest; here, everything is older than the trees. Even the people.

And those people are watching her as she chases after Olivia. There are the party-goers, and those too drunk on blood to know where they've gone. She shoves them aside as easily as parting wheat. There are the guards, who put up more of a fight. Arlinn doesn't indulge them. Their swings and arrows come one after the other, and one after the other she weaves between them, shouldering them when she's close enough. Even vampires fall when they lose their balance. She doesn't need them down forever—just long enough to get past. The geists behind her will finish the job.



But there are other eyes, too.

Olivia's, down the hall, challenging her to follow.

And the portraits.

There are plenty of them here. Dozens in this long stretch alone, maybe hundreds throughout the mansion proper. Arlinn didn't care to count. Dressed in their impossible finery, with thralls across their laps, their mouths slaked with blood—the people staring back at her belonged to a different world. To them, existing meant taking things from others. That's power, to a vampire: taking the most things from the highest places.

It isn't a world Arlinn wants to be in.

But it surrounds her all the same, this place that grew from death.

And it occurs to her, as she finally catches Olivia in a dead end, that there's nothing alive in this corridor except her.

No other soldiers. No fellow walkers. Not even her wolves.

The beat of Arlinn's heart is a war drum, a battle cry, a polemic against death. Olivia opens her mouth to say something, but that mouth has fed too much already; Arlinn can't countenance another word. With a human howl, she lashes out, her sharp nails raking the fine fabric of Olivia's gown—and, beneath it, her flesh. The scent of blood drives Arlinn

wilder—her teeth ache to grow to fangs—but she cannot let herself be lost just yet.

There's too much at stake.

*"You,"* Olivia sneers. "Why did *you* have to come?"

There's an answer, of course—because Olivia stole the Key—but Arlinn's not inclined to reason with her just now. She presses on, wild slash after wild slash. Olivia's hidden the Key somewhere in her train, Arlinn can smell it. The Progenitor is going to pay the price for her theft.

One she isn't inclined to pay, it seems. Only reasonable—vampires don't pay for much out-of-pocket. In her single-sightedness, Arlinn hadn't accounted for the unnatural architecture of the corridors. Somehow they've turned into an entirely new one from a dead end. Worse—there are suits of armor here.

And weapons.

Like the gilt sword, encrusted with gems, that Olivia picks up.

Arlinn can't pull back her swipe in time, and Olivia's all too eager to meet her. Steel bites into Arlinn's fingers. It hurts less than she expected, the thrill of the fight dulling all but the most important sensations. Still, the sight of her own bones peeking out at her is enough to slow her down.

"Give us the Key," Arlinn says.



"Us?" says Olivia. "Oh, what a *poor* little doggie." A pirouette disguises her coming lunge, and Arlinn parries with her forearm a moment too late. Olivia drives the sword's tip into Arlinn's chest with wicked delight. Metal grinds against Arlinn's collarbone as Olivia cups her cheek. "You're all alone here."

Arlinn's not sure which is worse—the pain, now rising past the point of ignorance, or Olivia's hateful voice. Red swims at the corners of her vision. The wolf within her cries out for freedom. Arlinn won't heed it, not now. She has to keep a clear head.

But before Arlinn's clear head can think of what to do, Olivia's shoving her right off the end of her sword with malicious glee. Arlinn kneels, her wound weeping onto the carpet. The painted vampires watch with unchanging amusement as Olivia—their Progenitor—cackles.

"I admit, none of this makes sense to me. Wolves aren't known for thinking things through, but even still, you're pack animals, aren't you?" Olivia says. Then she tuts. "Well. *Most* of you are."

Another flourish. Arlinn braces herself. Sure enough, mid-movement, Olivia's shooting toward her like a crossbow bolt. This time Arlinn ducks, lowering her shoulder and pushing back. It's enough to throw Olivia off balance, but only barely. Arlinn tries to grab her—but Olivia's claws find a home in Arlinn's gut.

Breathing's starting to get harder.

"It's for the best, you know," Olivia says. "Even for *your* kind. Humans are fun little toys, but when has one ever understood you?"

Arlinn wraps a hand around Olivia's wrist. Blood wells up at the back of her throat; she spits it all over Olivia's gown. "Maybe *you* should try . . . understanding them."

Olivia's full-face scowl is almost worth all the pain. Disgusted, she pushes Arlinn away again. "I don't make friends with my food," she says. "Now. Come on. If you're going to make this brave little stand of yours, do it properly. You know what you are, don't you?"

Arlinn Kord, daughter of a blacksmith and a baker.

Hard to think, hard to think.

"You know why you're here."

To get the Key. To bring daylight back to Innistrad.

To get revenge for the Harvesttide Massacre.

Olivia dabs a finger on the edge of her blade. She licks it clean, then frowns. "Certainly you *taste* awful. So. If you're going to do this, little pup, why not let yourself off the leash? You're never going to win in *that* shape."



She's right. Arlinn hates it, but she is.

And maybe that's the last touch of anger she needs to send her over the edge.

Senses sharpen. Strength returns to her as she grows, strength enough to keep fighting, at least for now. Her human mind is falling away, falling into the forest; she smells pine, tastes blood. Like the cry of a lost hunter, her last conscious thought: *this isn't the way we solve our problems.* But



*"Sure Strike", by Lie Setiawan.*

there is no one in the woods to hear it. Only the Key, only Olivia, only the faces staring back at her remain.

Pure instinct drives her. She pounces, Olivia twirls away. A flash of gold—the sword's coming again. Arlinn catches it barehanded and flings it aside. With the other, she hurls Olivia through a statue of herself.

Ahead, ahead, ahead. The Key's somewhere on her. Get it back. End this.

But there are the faces, too—these terrible faces.

Arlinn isn't sure what drives her to do it. Animal rage, perhaps—or an all-too-human rage that only the beast can unleash.

For just a moment, her attention shifts to the paintings—to digging trenches across their smug faces, to tearing the canvas, to howling with fury at the sight of them.

There are so many of them, after all—and she is here alone.

She doesn't notice Olivia's gotten behind her until it's too late.

How ironic—a vampire's stiffened hand makes for an excellent stake.

A plaintive whimper leaves Arlinn's throat.

She falls.

# EPISODE V
# Til Death Do Us Part

A SURPRISING ALLY ARRIVES
TO TURNS THE TIDE AGAINST THE VAMPIRES,
AND ARLINN CONTEMPLATES HER FUTURE
AS DAWN RETURNS TO INNISTRAD.

Law is the assertion of order over chaos. You cannot have one without the other. Every day of Adeline's training made that clear to her: cathars will always need to dispense justice, because chaos is the natural state of the world. Deep in the belly of the beast, surrounded on all sides by a maelstrom of entropy—that is when the cathar should feel most comfortable, as that is when they're needed most.

That's what they say, anyway. Adeline's beginning to wonder how much of what she was taught was wishful thinking.

*There are people who need my help,* she thought, and it became her only thought, the only thing that drove her on through the night, the only thing that kept her breathing. A sacred oath to protect the people of Innistrad lent her sword arm strength even when her flesh grew weary.

Chandra's right at home in the chaos. As a vampire's claw rakes across Adeline's shield, Chandra is there, bounding up onto a table to get a better angle. Their eyes link over the vampire's shoulder. Somehow—despite the screams, despite the obscenities, despite the death grunts around them—Chandra's smirking.

A pillar of flame consumes the vampire. Only a pile of ash remains of the woman, her jewelry sitting prettily atop it. Adeline lets out a breath.

Chandra grins. "Hammer and anvil works pretty—huh?"



*"Chandra, Dressed to Kill", by Viktor Titov.*



Her words cut off abruptly when Adeline pulls her close. Chandra raises her shield just in time. A wine bottle shatters against hardwood and steel. Red slicks the holy symbol staring back at their assailant and red, too, paints Adeline's helmet as the excess spills over.

"Guess that makes me the anvil," Adeline says.

A quick squeeze around her waist—hardly palpable in the armor—signals Chandra's thanks. "Hey, don't sound so down. We've got this."

She draws away. A thrall emerges from the melee, armed with a candelabra. Chandra blasts him with fire about a second before he makes contact; the candelabra clatters to the ground. Flames lick at the table runners.

Which is bad, given how many people have taken to duels atop the tables. There must be a dozen of them going on at least, and not all of them pit humans against vampires. It seems some of the bloodsuckers are taking the opportunity to settle old debts. In the bare moment Adeline spends glancing at them, she watches a well-dressed woman skewer a beautiful man before drawing him into a kiss. The tip of her blade juts from his back. He's smiling, somehow.

Everywhere she looks it's like this. Two mounted cathars are joined by a youth riding a trained pig; all three of them try to take on an engorged Falkenrath. There's a demon swinging a column at a group of farmers, and Sigarda is there to catch it. A guard cuts the head clean from a war-

rior's shoulders, tossing it to a blood-mouthed child, who catches it from the air like a well-trained dog.

Red gushes across the throat of the guard. He falls, bleeding his stolen blood onto the slick marble floor. Behind him, a violet-wreathed Kaya withdraws her knife.

"Any sign of Arlinn?" Adeline asks.

Kaya shakes her head. "We hold the line."

"Uh, Kaya, in case you haven't seen, it's less of a line here and more of a . . ." Chandra starts.

She stops, again—this time because a column's toppling over toward all three of them. Adeline rushes to save her—and manages it, if only because the column hovers suspended in its trajectory for a full second. The Time Mage's work. Chandra has powerful friends indeed.

"Nice catch, Adeline. I agree," Teferi says. He ducks an oncoming axe swing, tapping his staff against the guard's flank. The guard freezes in place long enough for a cathar to finish the job. "Everyone's scattering. We can't keep this up for long."

"Arlinn knows what she's doing," Kaya says. "She's going to finish the job—"



"Avacyn always fought with her sisters at her side. We shouldn't leave her alone," Adeline says. "She needs help."

"Can't spare anyone," Chandra says. "We have company."

And so they do—a dozen burly vampire guards, shields linked, marching straight toward them. A tall order at the best of times. Chandra sends out a gout of flame; their hesitation lasts only an instant.

Adeline sinks into her fighting stance.

Law is the assertion of order over chaos. A cathar is most needed in the maelstrom.

One of the guards hurls a javelin.

Adeline raises her shield.

Impact never comes.

A massive wolf lunges before them. The javelin bounces right off it, unable to pierce the dense muscle at its flanks. The wolf turns toward the vampires. The growl that leaves its throat is so low Adeline feels it rumbling in her lungs.

One paw beats the marble floor. Then: a howl.

Four more wolves—these normally sized—leap in through the windows. And they aren't the only ones. There must be dozens of wolves pouring in now, some big as boulders, from the windows and the open gates.

But why? Why are they here? Not long ago the wolves tore through civilians during the Harvesttide Massacre. Why save them?

"Did . . . did you guys invite them?" Chandra asks.

As if to answer, the largest of the wolves turns toward them. An arm juts from its great jaws. No—his. Adeline knows those scars.



*"Wedding Crasher", by Alexander Mokhov.*



It's Tovolar.

"Here to help?" Teferi asks.

The wolf nods. Kaya points out a particular door.

"She went that way," she says.

Tovolar's gone the second she's done talking, bounding over the remains of the chandelier toward Arlinn.

During the Travails, it was hard to know who was friend and who was foe. The lines got blurred. People you knew all your life burst into tendrils and carapaces.

This isn't as bad as the Travails—but Adeline's not sure what to make of the wolf, either.

...

Sorin Markov is well familiar with the dark. For thousands of years, darkness has been his best companion. And now, sinking into a pit of blood, he realizes that it might be the only companion he has left.

The other Planeswalkers from before . . . dead or gone, or shadows of their former selves.

Nahiri. A girl he once trusted. A woman who locked him in stone and forced him to watch the world crumble.

Avacyn, his most treasured creation. All of his hopes for the future in a single perfect frame. Unmaking her *hurt,* truly hurt. Even vampiric powers won't heal that wound in his heart.

And now . . .

Blood rushes against his eyelids. If he opens his mouth there'll be plenty to drink, plenty to give him strength. But if he does pull himself out of here, what's left? Seven thousand years of existence settle against his body. He's sinking further down into the sanguine depths.

What's left?

He strains to think. There must be something. People such as him see the greater image, not the smaller one. His grandfather taught him that.

His grandfather, who even now fought for the dreadful privilege of marrying Olivia Voldaren. His grandfather, who hurled him here for the same reason. Of all the wounds Sorin bore, Edgar had inflicted the first, and still Sorin had loved him for thousands of years.

Had that been part of his grandfather's plans, too? To use Sorin only when convenient? To indulge all those long conversations, as if indulging a child's tea parties?

The grander picture, not the smaller.



Yes, he sees it now.

Sorin's chest aches.

He opens his mouth.

Blood—sweet, sticky, intoxicating as wine—pours in. Sinew weaves itself back together. Bones crack into place. Wounds stitch shut. His muscles swell with stolen vigor—his vigor. They thought this cellar would drown him, but it's only made him stronger.

Sorin begins to climb.

It takes longer than he'd like. With every reach of his hand his body continues to heal itself, continues to stitch itself back together. He grunts. But he throws himself fully to the work, to the effort, and when he crests the lip of the pit there is no longer any place for doubt within him.

The ballroom. That is where his grandfather—*Edgar*—has gone.

One step after another. It is a predator's slink that propels him through the halls of the Sanguitorium, a predator's nose that guides him through the muttering corridors, a predator's instinct to pick up a greatsword along the way.

The sounds come to him before long: the clatter of metal, the groans of the dying, the beating of an angel's wings. Each one infuriating. Infuriating, too, the howl of wolves on Voldaren lands.

Well—it would have been infuriating days ago.

Now, a grim satisfaction comes over him. For millennia the vampires have plotted and schemed, torn out throats and staked hearts just for the barest taste of more power. It is only natural that the wolves—true pack animals—have come to rout them.

It occurs to him he has family in that ballroom, and it occurs to him—distantly, like a whisper through padded cloth—that he no longer cares.

Sorin steps into the maelstrom. An arrow whistles over his shoulder. He catches it, driving it into the throat of an oncoming Voldaren guard. The man struggles to breathe. Sorin twists the arrow's shaft.

"Quiet," he says.

The man collapses when Sorin pulls the arrow away. Sorin doesn't much care. Already he's surveying the room for Edgar. Olivia hardly matters anymore. She might be the one who arranged the wedding, but Edgar agreed to it. Edgar fought for it. Edgar cast away his own grandson for something as simple—as disposable, as fleeting—as power.

He is looking for Edgar.



There—rounding on Teferi and his companions, flanked by Markov duelists. Edgar wields his greatsword like a much younger man, cackling with glee. Has he always seemed so decrepit? His flesh so sullen, his eyes so beady?

There are those who try to get between Sorin and Edgar. A foolish way to stamp their own death warrants. Limbs fall from them like leaves from autumn branches. Sorin marches on.

Edgar swings on Teferi. The time mage slows the blow down, but only so much—he barely manages to block. The cathar takes on two of the duelists herself; the pyromancer's flames lick at Edgar's fine clothes. Two geists fade into existence in time to deal killing blows to the duelists.

The tide is turning. Edgar must be able to feel it as easily as Sorin does.

The face Sorin once thought beatific and wise wrenches in disgust. "You again?"

Sorin's attack is too quick for the humans to follow, and Edgar's parry just the same. Swords meet again and again, hands a blur, sparks flying around them. Sorin's onslaught is vicious, unrelenting, uninterested in peace or parley. Edgar might be powerful—but the blade has long since been Sorin's favored area of study.

Those who come to Edgar's aid also find swift ends. Sorin hasn't the mind to keep track of it beyond the most passing sense, but he knows the others are keeping them at bay.

In the end it is Edgar who falls from the rumble first, scrambling backward, his sword clattering to the ground like a toy.

"Sorin," he says. "You have to understand—"

Sorin rests the tip of his borrowed sword at the base of Edgar's throat. "I understand, Edgar. The larger picture, not the smaller. Sacrifices. Power. I understand perfectly now what you think of me."

And he understands, too, how easy it would be to kill the man here. A simple flick of his wrists is all it would take. A moment's resistance, a dying gasp—that would be all.

Yet something stays his hand.

Perhaps the unseen hand of an angel, long gone.

Sorin scowls. "Go. Get out of my sight."

For all his blustering, for all his power, Edgar doesn't need to be told twice. Like a frightened cat he scampers away. Where he's going is no concern of Sorin's. Instead, his eyes remain on the spot where his grandfather had just been—the place where he might have died.



". . . Are you all right?"

The pyromancer, probably. He's surprised at the concern in her voice. She never seemed to like him.

"Yes," he lies. Sorin wipes his blade clean. When at last he looks up, he sees that the others are giving them a wide berth. Vampire corpses litter the floor like the dregs of a feast.

"Sorin, I know—I know that must have been hard for you, but you did the right thing," says Teferi.

Sorin wants to glare at him. How can he know? How can he judge? And yet it occurs to him—Teferi, too, is old. Teferi, too, has known loss, has seen things beyond his imagining.

And the others might be shorter lived—but there is something that they all understand about one another inherently. A restlessness. A wanderlust.

". . . Thank you."

It is all he can think of to say.

…

Arlinn Kord dreams of forests.

She dreams of boughs beneath her padded feet, of autumn leaves falling in lazy circles around her, of the wind through her fur.

Boulder and Patience run shoulder to shoulder with her. Streak bounds ahead. She is sure, somehow, that Redtooth is behind them.

A pain in her chest.

For as free as she feels with her wolves at her side, the truth is unavoidable. They've left.

She is alone.

"Arlinn."

Wolves have many means of speaking—but her name has always eluded the maws of her closest companions. Arlinn furrows her brow. She wants to slow, but her packmates keep her marching on.

"Arlinn, it's time to hunt."

It feels terrible. Like her head's the cathedral bell, and the voice is the hammer.

She wants to stop.



But then—a warmth. Something at her side, solid, its heart beating in a rapid tattoo. Warmth against her face. A familiar scent.

The stag can wait.

When she opens her eyes, Tovolar is the first thing she sees—still bearing the wounds from their last encounter. The softness of his expression throws his powerful body into relief.

"You're here?" she asks.

"You called for aid," comes the answer, roughly shaped from his muzzle.

And it's when she stirs that she realizes they're not alone. Boulder's at her side, too—they all are. Relief and joy overtake the pain of her injuries as she throws her arms around them. Her pack! And they are just as eager to see her, too, lapping at her face, bopping her with their noses.

But the embrace isn't meant to last long. With joy comes clarity, and with clarity comes memory.

Olivia's the one who hurt her like this. And Olivia's the one with the Key.

Boulder and Patience help her to her feet. She shifts, again, knowing her human nose will do her no favors here. Nor will her human healing. She needs the wolf.



*"End the Festivities", by Chris Rallis.*

Yet there's one thing nagging at her, too—the near-sheepish rounding of Tovolar's shoulders.

"Tovolar," she says, "This doesn't change anything between us. What you did . . ."

"Tonight, we settle this," he says. Words are hard to form in that shape—but it isn't as if Tovolar can change as easily as she can. "Afterward, come find me. We'll settle it like packmates."



Arlinn's skin crawls. Tovolar isn't her pack—these three are. But it'll have to do for now, won't it? The Voldarens gaining absolute control over the other vampires—and the angels—wouldn't be good for the wolves, either.

She doesn't dignify him with a response. Olivia's scent is thick in this place, her blood upon the marble fresh and enticing. It'll be easy enough to track her down.

Arlinn doesn't need to tell Tovolar to follow.

She doesn't need to tell the wolves, either. Together the five of them run through the halls of Voldaren Manor, staggered two at a time, blood rushing in their ears. It hurts. Of course, it does.

But that's nothing compared to what'll happen if Olivia gains control over all of Innistrad's angels.

Her trail takes them not back toward the ballroom, but up somewhere higher. Stairs are hard to negotiate on four feet. They make do. There isn't room for anything else.

It isn't long before Edgar's voice comes to them from down a hall.

"You promised you had everything under control."

"I did. All of this . . . this *nonsense* . . ."

The wolves round the corridor. There, at the end of the hall, surrounded by statues of herself, is Olivia Voldaren. Edgar Markov stands with her, covered in blood, his breathing ragged. Olivia's face is alight with fury; her hand flies once more to her sword. Edgar reaches for her shoulder.

"Olivia, it's over," he says.

She bats his hand away. "You touch me only when I allow you to touch me."

The wolves draw near. Arlinn comes to a stop before them, a rumble low in her throat. Olivia knows what she wants. Tovolar bites at Edgar—but Arlinn's sharp bark cuts him off.

This is Olivia's mess. She gets a chance to make it right.

Arlinn isn't sure what wins out in the end: Olivia's pique, or her lack of patience. Maybe it's her own sniveling cowardice.

But she drops the Key.

It clatters, without much ceremony, against the floor.

"Have your little toy, if it matters so much to you," she sneers.

Arlinn wraps the Key with a length of torn curtain and picks it up between her teeth.Olivia's already taken off through one of the windows. Edgar soon follows. Tovolar leaps up the side of the walls, scrambling to



get at them—but he comes back down with only the tails of Edgar's coat caught between his jaws.

He's glowering. She expects he would. No doubt he wanted to tear them apart and end this threat forever.

Part of Arlinn does, too.

But there'll be time for that later.

As Arlinn shifts back to human form, she catches Tovolar's eye.

"If you've got a problem with how I run things, come find me later," she says. "Me and my pack will sort you out."

…

The Moonsilver Key lends weary feet new speed. The whole way from Stensia to Kessig they take no breaks, make no stops. Teferi's efforts to speed them further leave him exhausted—by the time they arrive, he's fast asleep within the carriage.

Every step is hard-won. Every step is a victory.

But all will mean nothing if the ritual isn't completed.

Katilda assures them they still have a chance. Her spirit bound to the Moonsilver Key as it is, she's followed them on their journey. Kaya keeps her company for most of the trip—but Arlinn has questions for her, too.

"How can we be sure it'll work?"

"How can you be sure it won't?"

Being a spirit must make you more inclined to mystery—not less.

"I just like to be sure of things," Arlinn answers. They're walking through the woods, most of the others asleep in a carriage. Adeline's charger has taken up the yoke, along with Kaya's borrowed gelding. They are the only ones awake of the whole group—the cathar, the wolf, and the spirit. "You can't fault me for that."

"You don't know yourself very well," Katilda answers. "If you acted only when you were certain, you wouldn't be here, would you?"

They say the worst dog bites come from pups you raise with your own two hands. Arlinn winces.

Her eyes fall on the carriage, again. She thinks of everyone within it. Chandra curled up on one of the benches, Kaya somehow asleep leaning against the wall, Teferi taking the other bench. And all along the floor—her wolves, slumbering peacefully, their bellies full.



"Were you certain of them?"

The question startles her from her thoughts. Arlinn glances toward Katilda. "Of course I was. Some of the strongest mages around. How could I not be?"

"You knew I didn't mean the mages."

Another wince. There's no fooling witches, is there? "Sorin had his own reasons for wanting to help us. He's made his mistakes, but at the end of the day he loves Innistrad as much as I do. I knew he'd come around."

Left unspoken is that Sorin didn't make the journey with them. He said there were things to which he still needed to attend. Cryptic, as always. She suspected that it wasn't just brooding obfuscation on his part this time. He stayed behind to help them attend to the fallen, to the injured. Anyone who needed long-term support was moving into Markov Manor for a few months. He insisted it was only because he had access to medical texts the others could only dream of.

And maybe it was.

Or maybe it was something else, and he just didn't want to admit it.

Thus—"I have other matters to attend to."

Thinking of it does bring a smile to her face. She knew there was a heart in there somewhere.

But the smile shrinks at Katilda's next needle: "You know I didn't mean him, either."

The woods are lovely at night, the scent of pine clear and bracing like good whiskey. Arlinn lets it linger in her nose for a little while.

"There's a day coming where you won't have to ask that question," she says.

"A day many years past the Harvesttide Massacre," Katilda says. Her spectral form flickers.

"He'll pay for what he's done," she says. That's the real question here—she's sure of it. "Once all this is taken care of, I'll start tracking him down."

"And yet how will he pay?" Katilda asks. "What currency can he give us for the lives he's taken? You are a human who wears the skin of a beast. He is a beast, no matter the shape he wears."

It isn't the conversation she wanted to have. Still, it needs saying.

"Tovolar re-built the Mondronen Howlpack out of fear," she begins. "He'll tell you there are other reasons, but at the end of the day, it's fear.



Too many of his friends walked the same line I do—and they got killed for it, no matter how good they were."

There is a man lumbering ahead of her in the woods. He doesn't talk much. He doesn't need to. They understand each other.

Arlinn pushes the memory aside.

"When you're a werewolf, you're never just yourself. Doesn't matter who you are—people will assume things about you. You're responsible for any villager any wolf has ever killed, and you don't want to be. You're afraid. You run, you find a pack. They don't judge you for what you are, and they tell you it's okay to be that way. That you *have* to be—because otherwise, humans will kill you. And they're right enough that most people never have a second thought."

Avabruck through a wolf's eyes. Her parents, wondering where she's gone. A secret she can't share.

"It isn't until you get some distance that you realize they're wrong. There is another path. Not an easy one, by any means—you've got to change what you expect about humans, and humans have to change what they expect about you—but it's there. If *everyone* can agree to work toward a different plane, we can build one step-by-step, each of us a brick. It'll take years. Decades, maybe. But we can get there. Still—when you're a werewolf, you worry about right now. What you're going to eat, who's

hunting you, what you're doing to stay safe during the day. It's hard to see the bigger picture, and harder to feel connected to it."

Tovolar around the fire, staring at her as if she'd grown a second head.

"I told him all of this years ago. I told him there was another way. He didn't believe me. To him, humans will never change. They'll always think we're monsters—so why not be monsters? Why keep ourselves from his idea of greatness?"

She swallows.

"Something like Harvesttide doesn't come from nowhere. If you asked him he'd say there are a hundred times more wolves that have died over the years. That Harvesttide was only the beginning."

The words taste disgusting even as she speaks them. Arlinn can't imagine a worldview she disagrees with more. Yet even still . . .

"You asked what justice looks like there. Tell you the truth, I'm not sure. How do you punish someone who lives their whole life in fear and anger without stoking those flames? I want him to pay for what he's done. But I want him to get better, too. I want him to see that there is another way. That we can work together toward a better day—and that Harvesttide only set us back a couple decades. They make humans more likely to kill us, not less."



Arlinn takes another breath of the cool air. It brings her less clarity than she'd like.

"You asked me if I was sure he'd come. I wasn't," she admits. "But I thought that if he did—he'd see that we *can* all work together. I wanted him to see that if he helped, people would be grateful, that we didn't have to fight. I thought it was important."

Katilda, floating beside her, looks up to the moon. For a long while neither of them says anything. The weight of Arlinn's speech settles across her shoulders, heavier than a bearskin. To be honest, she hadn't thought any of it through—just said what her heart was feeling. Now that her mind's had a chance to hear it, she's still processing.

She's not sure she's ever going to be done sorting through it.

"Do you think it helped?" Katilda asks.

And the answer's as obvious as it is hard to say, each syllable wrung from her like water from a rag. "I don't know. But I had to try."

"I would give you advice, Arlinn," Katilda says.

Arlinn rolls her shoulders. "Let's hear it."

"It's admirable not to forget the man behind the crimes," she says, "but nor should you forget the crimes themselves. Whatever your hopes

for Tovolar, he's betrayed them as often as he's fulfilled them. One day you're going to have to reckon with that. It won't be enough to simply hope for better."

Again—each word, a needle. Arlinn closes her eyes. The earth is cool and springy beneath her feet. It is night on Innistrad, and they are on the way to save it.

"I know," she says. "I know."

...



*"Glorious Sunrise", by Andreas Zafiratos.*



"So we're sure this is going to work, right?" says Chandra.

Arlinn smirks. "Yes, we're sure."

She stands at the center of the Celestus, the others gathered on one of its outer arms. Katilda is before her, returned now to her rightful body. In Arlinn's hand is the Sungold Lock—along with the blood and offerings from before the ritual's sudden interruption.

The Moonsilver Key, token of victory, sits in the witch's hands. A faint magical glow surrounds her.

*"Root and Soul, Blood and Fang,"* she intones—and it is not her voice, but the voices of all the gathered witches, the voice of the plane itself. *"Let Innistrad stand united beneath the warmth of the sun."*

Raised by the joined magic of the Dawnhart Coven, the Key floats toward the Sungold Lock. Arlinn holds it aloft, just as she's been instructed.

Part of her worries that it won't fit—that they've gotten a duplicate.

But that worry dies the instant gold meets silver.

A flash of light floods the Celestus, yet not a frightening one. It's warm as sunlight, warm as promises, and Arlinn's skin is happy to drink it in. She doesn't even have to close her eyes. All around them the Celestus roars to life, shaking off centuries of overgrowth. Some of the trees still

cling as the arms begin to rotate. Arlinn's never seen a tree clear over her head before, and admittedly, it fills her with a childlike sense of joy.

So, too, does the sight of her companions scrambling from their arm to another before they fall off. It happens so slowly they aren't in any real danger, especially not with Teferi around, but it's funny nonetheless. The rim—thankfully—is far more stationary.

With each passing of the arms overhead, the light around them increases in intensity. Eventually only a single column remains, running from this very platform to the moon itself. It's difficult to watch it and feel anything but eternal.

Arlinn can't think of anything to say. She thinks there isn't anything to say, at all, about this. Sometimes you just have to shut up and appreciate what's happening—appreciate the absurdity of life itself.

A blacksmith's daughter stands beneath an ancient device and watches day return to Innistrad.

When the light fades—and it is long in fading—the moon has already begun her descent, sinking like a dropped coin beneath the waves of the horizon. Next to her, she hears Katilda picking up the Key.

Arlinn raises a brow. "Don't you need that?"



Katilda looks up at the sky. "If all goes well, not for another thousand years. There is another here who has greater need of it."

Best not to argue with witches. As the moon sinks below the horizon, Arlinn walks with Katilda toward the rim of the Celestus. There the others are sitting, their legs hanging over the edge.

Ahead of them the Kessig woods run on and on and on. She knows every inch of them as well as she knows her own skin. She knows what they look like in the night, in the morning, and in the precious dawn hours, when every bough is painted pink.

Yet the thought of seeing all of it again is almost enough to bring her to tears.

She sits among them, her friends, and her wolves quickly surround her. Patience lays in her lap. Katilda joins them, too.

Together they watch the first sun rise over Innistrad in months. It is the same as every other sunrise—but therein lies the beauty. Every single sunrise is a gift. It is something that defies expectation, something that almost defies belief: every morning a golden ball of fire crests the horizon, and that act alone is enough to bring light to the world.

It is the first sunrise in months. It is like every other sunrise. And it is all the more perfect for that.

Cheers erupt the moment the sun finally shows herself. Arlinn can't keep from joining in, the joy as golden in her soul as the disk they're celebrating. Even the wolves join in—howling, for once, at the sun. Lovers kiss, friends link arms. Ancient songs with familiar melodies lift the spirits of the attendees.

And, of course, there is drink.

Someone slips a goblet into Arlinn's hand almost without her noticing. The spiced wine is warm against her skin even through its container, and warmer still when it blooms across her chest.

But there is a coldness that follows it as she realizes it's time for the others to go.

In the gathered crowd—now a party—she finds her friends.

Chandra and Adeline come first. She finds them, just as she expected, secreted away beneath the boughs of a willow tree. A veil of leaves keeps the secret of their parting. Arlinn can't hear what they're saying from here, either—only just barely make out their embrace. It feels right, to stay at this distance. Chandra will find her later to say goodbye—but for now, best to let them have this.

She's only gone a few steps away when she hears Kaya. "Spying, huh? Didn't think you had it in you."



"I just wanted to check in on them," Arlinn says.

"Sure you did," Kaya answers. She crosses her arms, looking toward the willow. "Didn't figure she'd like this place so much."

"Innistrad's more than just doom and gloom," Arlinn says. "I hope you've found that, too."

Kaya smirks. "Maybe. Or maybe I don't mind doom and gloom," she says. "It's been nice working with you, Arlinn."

"Nice working with you, too," Arlinn says. "Hopefully it won't be the last time."

"Of course not. There's a lot of ghosts here with unsettled business. I'm sure you'll need my expertise before too long. Just remember I don't work for free," she says.

"Sure you don't," Arlinn says, smirking.

But by then, Kaya's already shimmering out of existence.

Teferi isn't far, either—and he has company. Katilda's with him. As Arlinn approaches, they both turn toward her. In Teferi's hand is the Moonsilver Key.

"Ahh, so you're the one who needs the Key," Arlinn says.

Teferi smirks. “She’s been kind enough to lend me the Key. Moonsilver has a number of fascinating properties, particularly for temporal magic.”

“I hope it serves you well, then,” she says. “But remember you’ve got to return it, or I’ll hunt you down.”

Teferi smiles and hugs her. “I’d never escape a wolf on my tail. It’s been good to see you, Arlinn.”

“And good to see you, too,” she says.

But there’s something hanging in the air, something yet unsaid. Teferi holds her at arm’s length searching for the words.

“Bad news?” Arlinn asks.

“Might be. You’re going to have to keep an eye out. We’ve had trouble, lately. Old trouble.”

“That means something, coming from you,” Arlinn says. She hopes a bit of levity will make things easier, but Teferi isn’t cheered at all.

“I know better than most how serious the threat is. They’re called Phyrexians. If you see any strange black oil, beings of flesh and metal . . . anything strange at all, let the rest of us know. I had hoped we might find a clue during this endeavor, but it turned out well. This Key is promising.”



Teferi once spoke of a place he’d known once before, a place he’d failed. From the look in his eyes, she had the feeling the two are related.

“Something might be coming. Be certain you’re ready for it.”

“I will,” she says. “No matter what, Innistrad will endure.”

He smiles at her again—but with only a shadow of his usual mirth. “It’s in good hands, isn’t it? Take care, Arlinn.”

Soon, he too fades.

She knows the Kessig woods.

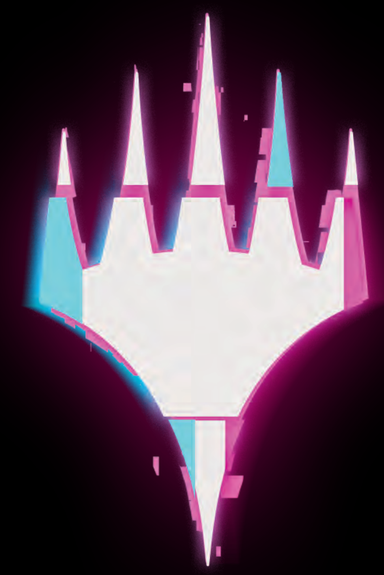
But they call to her, all the same, the light now filtering through the leaves of evergreens. Snow falls like flower petals upon the forest. The air is bright with the scent of winter.

Even though her friends will soon be gone, Arlinn Kord has her pack.



*“Katilda’s Rising Dawn”, by Manuel Castañón.*

MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# KAMIGAWA
## 輝ける世界
## NEON DYNASTY

By Akemi Dawn Bowman

# Episode I
# A Stranger in Eiganjo

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KAITO NEVER FELT COMFORTABLE AMONG THE IMPERIALS
UNTIL HE UNEXPECTEDLY BECAME FRIENDS
WITH THE EMPEROR HERSELF.

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Of all the rooms in the Imperial Palace, the kitchen was Kaito's favorite.

The fragrant smell of ramen broth, pork dumplings, and katsu curry wafted through the corridor and out the side window, where Kaito was perched. He inhaled like he was in a haze, and slipped off the ledge and into the store room, keeping his footsteps as soundless as possible. Just like Light-Paws taught him.

Not that the Emperor's advisor would approve of Kaito's extracurricular activities.

Dishes were stacked on the nearby counter; the basin beside it was filled with soapy water, bubbles rising dangerously close to the edge. Kaito was nearly to the door when a small kami poked its head out of the water, blinking like it had just been woken from a nap. Four miniature



*"Eiganjo, Seat of the Empire", by Julian Kok Joon Wen.*

teacups floated around its salamander-shaped body, its face framed by a collection of painted horns that resembled broken shards of porcelain.

Kaito paused, bracing for a lecture, when the Kami of Imperial Dishware snatched up another dirty plate and sunk below the water, uninterested in whatever Kaito was up to.

The corner of his mouth tugged with humor, and he darted around the corner toward the wide, open kitchen.



The palace cooks were distracted with their preparations. Between the clattering pans, boiling broth, and *thwacking* sounds of a butcher's knife against a chopping board, it didn't matter that Kaito was soundless—he might as well be invisible.

His eyes trailed hungrily over the center table, where round pieces of blue mochi sat in uniform rows, each decorated with a smiling face and small, yellow eyes shaped like crescent moons.

Kaito raised a hand, fingers dancing lightly like he was gathering his courage. Two pieces of mochi floated up in the air, hovering inches above the table.

Kaito pulled the sweets closer with his mind, concentrating as they drifted toward him. He reached out, holding his breath, and snatched them out of the air—just as one of the cooks spotted him from behind a pot of glass noodles.

"Hey!" The cook's face was already red from the steam, but now it was turning a shade of purple. "What did I tell you about stealing?"

Kaito tore back down the corridor, stumbling over his footing. He could hear someone running after him, but he wasn't about to waste time looking over his shoulder. He turned back for the store room, elbow catching the edge of a dirty pan, and sent a stack of plates toppling over the counter.

With the mochi still clutched against his chest, Kaito threw out his free hand to hold the dishes midair. They hovered in place, but the footsteps in the hall were close. Too close.

Kaito had no choice.

He released the dishes and leapt for the window, just as the explosion of porcelain echoed behind him. The kami burst from the soapy water, shrieking at the mess and the startled cook standing beside the broken dishes.

With a smirk, Kaito shoved one piece of mochi in his mouth and the other in his pocket, jumped from the windowsill, and made his way back over the surrounding wall.

Like most buildings in Eiganjo, the Imperial Palace had low, curved roofs and terraced spaces. Moss and sand gardens were featured in abundance, some of them trailing up the sides of the palace, with trees protruding from the displays.

Even with the palace guarded by loyal samurai and towering Imperial surveillance mechs, Kaito roamed freely between his lessons. Most Imperials didn't pay him any attention at all. They were more preoccupied with maintaining positive kami relations, regulating tech, and monitoring how closely the Futurists were following the rules.



*Balance*, Light-Paws often called it.

Kaito didn't care about balance; he was just glad nobody seemed to bother watching the rooftops.

Scaling the edge of the nearest apartment, Kaito followed a makeshift trail over the houses and back to the sparring room's rock garden. The sliding doors were wide open. As far as he could tell, Light-Paws wasn't even there yet.

Kaito hurried across the sand, passing a spiral of shattered stones half-sunken in the ground. They hummed faintly with energy; an ancient relic from the past.

The moment Kaito stepped through the sliding doors, he knew he was not alone.

"You're late," Eiko's sharp voice rang out from the shadows. "And your face is covered in rice flour."

Kaito spun toward his sister. Even though they were the same age, Eiko had always seemed older. Maybe because after their parents died, she felt like it was her responsibility to look after her brother.

Kaito looked after Eiko too, but he would never chastise her for having fun.

Not that Eiko did much of that anymore.

He dragged a sleeve across his mouth. “Don’t be mad.” He dug the other piece of mochi out of his pocket and held it out to her. “I brought you a gift.”

Eiko frowned, but the hint of a smile flashed in her eyes. With a sigh, she took the mochi and plopped it in her mouth, dusting her fingers against her shirt. “You need to start taking your training more seriously. It’s been five years—most Imperials would’ve chosen a speciality by now.”

Kaito shrugged, still grinning. It usually kept Eiko from being *too* angry with him. “We’re the exception, not the rule. Maybe if we stick with general training long enough, we’ll never have to be separated. We can stay just like this forever.”

Eiko flattened her mouth, cheeks blossoming with color. “Kaito, I—”

Light-Paws entered the room, and whatever Eiko was going to say seemed to halt at the edge of her lips.

Dressed in her decorative kimono, Light-Paws strode across the room with the balance and nobility of someone who wasn’t just raised an Imperial—they were the very *example* of one. Seven white tails flicked behind her. A sign of the kitsune’s age and wisdom.

Kaito and Eiko both bowed respectfully. Light-Paws was their teacher, but she was also the closest thing they had to a guardian.





*“Light-Paws, Emperor’s Voice”, by Randy Vargas.*

Even if Kaito didn’t love the rules of the palace, it never stopped him from craving Light-Paws’ approval. He just wished it came as naturally to him as it did to Eiko. Imperial life suited his sister.

But for Kaito, there were too many walls.

Light-Paws folded her arms behind her and looked straight at Kaito. “You and Eiko will no longer be sparring partners.”

Kaito's brows pinched. "We aren't training anymore?" He glanced at his sister, but she only bit the edge of her lip.

"You will train," Light-Paws corrected. "But not together. Eiko has chosen to study as a kami diplomat. I have arranged her schedule to coincide with her fellow Imperial students."

Kaito felt the world tilt. He turned to his sister. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Eiko's shoulders sank. "I tried to. Many times. But you never want to talk about our future, and I couldn't delay my training any longer. We won't be children forever, Kaito."

"Delay?" he repeated. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She flattened her mouth. "The reason I took so long to choose a speciality was because I was hoping you'd pick one first. I thought—I thought it might make things easier."

Kaito flinched, wounded. He may not have wanted things to change, but he also never wanted to hold his sister back.

How long had she been keeping such a secret?

"I'm sorry," Eiko said, pressing a hand to her brother's shoulder. "But it's time. For both of us. And maybe now you'll be able to choose your focus too, without worrying about me."



Light-Paws observed them both without speaking, so still even her tails had stopped swaying.

Kaito blinked, fighting the sting in his eyes. "It's fine. I'm happy for you." It was what a good brother would say.

And he wanted to be a good brother, even if he didn't make a good Imperial.

Eiko nodded, letting her hand drop. Things would be different now. She'd study in the libraries and council rooms, and take trips to the bustling metropolitan center of Towashi, and perhaps even to the outskirts of the Jukai Forest to mend kami relations.

There wasn't much of the forest left—most of it had been cut down to make space for the city. Now the kami guarded it fiercely, and only the most skilled in kami diplomacy had any chance at quelling hostilities.

It would be the perfect job for Eiko, one day. All the while, Kaito would be stuck here. In the palace. Without any plan for his future.

Light-Paws took a careful step forward, raising her chin slightly even as she peered down at Kaito. "Swift-Arm is waiting for you in the sakura garden. He will introduce you to your new sparring partner."

Kaito swallowed the knot in his throat, but he couldn't shake his surprise. Swift-Arm ran the elite Golden-Tail Academy for Imperial samurai. What would make him ever agree to train Kaito? And *why*?

"I'll go at once," Kaito said with an even voice, and left the room, eager for a distraction.

The sakura gardens were deep in the heart of the Imperial Palace. There was a shortcut over the wall, but Kaito took the long route through the buildings and up the stone stairs. He was close to the Emperor's chambers and Kyodai's temple; he had to at least appear to be on his best behavior.

Kaito had only ever spoken to the Emperor behind a screen door. The first time was by accident—he'd climbed over the wrong wall trying to get away from a Kami of Spring Blossoms who did not take kindly to Kaito accidentally trampling a flower bed, and ended up in a private garden surrounded by hydrangea and koi ponds. An extravagant porch led to a paper screen door, where warm light glowed behind it. Someone was sitting at the edge of the room, but all Kaito could see was their shadow.

He'd tried to sneak away, but he'd only made it two steps when a voice called out to him and asked what he was doing.

Kaito hadn't known it was the Emperor. All he heard was the voice of a girl his own age. Someone more likely to be his friend than someone who'd report back to Light-Paws about the mischief he was up to.



So Kaito told her the truth. How he'd snuck into the restricted section of the library on a dare and was halfway toward grabbing one of the books when someone spotted him. How he'd never run so fast in his life trying to get away, and had to climb across three different roofs, five walls, and scale a building just to get to safety.

The girl had smiled behind the screen. He could hear it in her voice when she told him she'd never heard anything so silly in all her life.

They talked for nearly an hour before Kaito realized he was late for a lesson. And when he asked what the girl's name was, she didn't tell him. It was forbidden for the Emperor to reveal her name, even to those closest to her. But she told him he was welcome to come back and see her the next time he needed somewhere to hide.

As Kaito was leaving, he climbed back up the wall and looked around at the building—so he'd know where to return—when he realized he was standing in the Emperor's garden.

A good Imperial would've known better than to return. A good subject would've known speaking so casually to the Emperor of Kamigawa was improper. And a good student wouldn't let a distraction get in the way of their studies.

But Kaito wasn't good at anything but following his own heart.

The next time he went to visit the Emperor behind the screen, he didn't make a big deal about knowing who she really was, aside from calling her "Your Emperorness" when he felt he needed *something* to call her. He just talked to her like a friend, day after day.

And eventually, that's what they became.

Kaito reached the gates of the sakura garden and curled his fingers into fists. He'd tell the Emperor about Eiko's choice the next time he spoke with her. But when she inevitably followed up by asking how Kaito felt about it, what would he say?

Light-Paws was grooming them for service to the Emperor. It was their duty to elevate their training. How could he possibly tell the Emperor of Kamigawa that he was *unhappy* about it?

Becoming a samurai made the most sense for Kaito. He was strong and fast for his age, and he had telekinesis—he could be an asset to the Imperials, with the right training.

Maybe this was Light-Paws' plan. To put Kaito in a position where if Swift-Arm recruited him directly, he wouldn't be able to say no.

Swift-Arm was waiting on the grass, his Imperial armor assembled strategically around his kitsune shape. The metal flickered against the



sunlight, made up of varying shades of gold, bronze, and russet, with an extravagant fan spread against his back.

Beneath his matching helmet, Swift-Arm gave a curt nod. "Light-Paws tells me you are an excellent swordsman."

Kaito grimaced. This was it. He was going to be pulled deeper into Imperial life, with no way of ever getting out. He'd be a samurai until he died. "Er—yes, sir."

Swift-Arm grunted. "I don't believe Light-Paws to be a liar, but neither have a I ever met an *excellent* swordsman who hesitates." His whiskers bristled. "Want to try that again?"

Kaito straightened. "I can fight well, sir. I've been training with my sister for many years."

"Good." Swift-Arm turned to his side, stern eyes fixed beyond the sakura trees. "We're in need of a new sparring partner. Someone adept in skill who won't fall behind on their studies. And since you haven't moved on from general training…"

Kaito heard the distaste in his voice. The implication that Kaito was lazy, and not at all samurai material.

He hid his delight. Maybe there was still hope.

Swift-Arm was too busy watching something behind the trees. “You will remember to be respectful at all times, but you will also treat these lessons just as any other, understood?”

Kaito nodded, and a nearby door slid open. Footsteps sounded down the path. Swift-Arm bowed low.

Preparing to do the same, Kaito pressed his feet together, but stopped short when a girl appeared around the corner. A girl with snow-white hair, brown eyes, and an expression too serious to belong to someone so young.

“Thank you for your service.” Her voice was practiced and formal, but Kaito recognized the familiarity in it, too.

The Emperor of Kamigawa.

Kaito’s eyes widened. He’d never seen her face before—only her shadow. But the shadow he knew was full of warmth, and heart, and dreams of what the world could one day be.

She was more than a shadow. She was someone Kaito cared about.

He remembered to bow. “Thank you for the opportunity, Your Emperorness—er, *Highness*.”





*“When We Were Young”, by Eric Deschamps.*

She didn’t react to the clumsy nickname he’d been using for years, but Swift-Arm’s nose twitched disapprovingly. He picked up one of the wooden practice swords from its stand. With two hands, he held it out to the Emperor and dipped his head. When he retrieved the second, he tossed it to Kaito from several feet away.

Kaito was quick—his hand snapped into the air, catching the sword by the handle before it hit him in the chest.

Swift-Arm eyed him, but said nothing.

Taking up their positions on the grass, Kaito and the Emperor raised their swords, preparing to spar.

Kaito knew he should be watching her every movement, but he couldn't look away from her eyes. Did she recognize him? Did she recognize his voice?

Did she think of him as a friend, or had Kaito only imagined it in his head?

Swift-Arm gave the order to begin, and Kaito swung his sword. The Emperor blocked—her fighting style was like water, fluid and powerful. They moved in circles around the makeshift sparring ring, swords clacking together with precision, neither of them breaking a sweat.

Kaito took a step back, sword raised in defense, when he caught Swift-Arm's glare.

*Treat these lessons just as any other.*

Clenching his teeth, Kaito nodded. He understood what was expected of him. And he hoped the Emperor would forgive him.

He swung his sword hard, pushing the Emperor back toward the edge of the ring. He was relentless, attacking in sharp, quick bursts of fury—the opposite of her calm energy.



If she was a breathless lake, he was a tsunami.

Kaito would wear her out in moments. He was sure of it.

The Emperor blocked, again and again, and then spun away from him like floating silk, so graceful that the force of her next blow caught him off guard. His sword strained beneath hers, and she held firm. And then in one swift movement, she rolled her body and cracked the edge of her sword against Kaito's handle.

He felt it rattle in his palm, but it was too late. She spun again, kicking Kaito in the stomach as she took possession of his sword with her free hand, and held both wooden blades to his neck before he even had time to steady himself.

Kaito looked up at the Emperor—at the way the sunlight exploded behind her, silhouetting her slender frame like she was once again a shadow behind a screen—and watched a smile appear at the edge of her lips. A smile of recognition.

Swift-Arm was still watching, so Kaito tried not to smile back. But inside, he was glowing.

...

Over the years, Kaito and the Emperor continued to train together. And when they weren't training, Kaito found ways to meet her in the garden, where they could speak through the porch screen. Without Swift-Arm's watchful eye, they were just two childhood friends sharing their secrets.

Kaito hoped what they had would never change, even as the world around them did. Rumors of Uprisers in the mountains of Sokenzan City plagued everyday conversation. The Futurists had grown increasingly frustrated by the Imperial regulations over technology. In the Jukai Forest, kami relations were still fraught with tension.

And Eiko was always busy studying. Sometimes it felt like the Emperor was all Kaito had left.

Pressing his fingers against the black roof tiles, Kaito double-checked his grip. It had rained overnight, and some of the guttering still flowed with water. But he liked the challenge, and it was a good way to practice staying on his toes—literally.

In the distance, the Eiganjo train rounded a corner, pulling into the station like a metal dagger. Mechs shaped like origami beasts loomed from the surrounding cliffs, and moth riders appeared overhead, waiting to greet the new arrivals—Futurists coming in from the floating city of Otawara to speak with the Emperor's advisors.



Kaito stuffed the last piece of red bean bun into his mouth, clapped the crumbs from his hands, and skirted along the edge of the roofline toward the Emperor's dwelling.

Halfway there, he spotted a man dressed in Futurist armor standing in one of the terraced gardens. A moonfolk, hovering several inches above the grass.

*He must have come ahead of the others,* Kaito observed.

Blue lights blazed across the Futurist's chest in uneven patterns, making the nearly-white color of his vest glow. Thin sheets of rose-gold metal sat on his shoulders in layers. The man pinched one with his fingers, plucking it like he was pulling a leaf from a tree.

In his hand, the triangular shape expanded before folding over itself again and again, shifting into an origami crane-shaped drone. It took off quickly, disappearing into the clouds like it was carrying a secret on its wings.

When the man turned back around, Kaito was standing in front of him.

The stranger widened his eyes, clearly startled. He soaked in Kaito's youthful face, assessing his age, and relaxed, feet pressing against the ground. "Impressive, kid. It's been a long time since anyone snuck up on me like that." With a chuckle, he added, "But you're lucky the Imperials



*"Replication Specialist", by Cristi Balanescu.*

took my weapons at the gate. People like me tend to slice first and ask questions later."

Kaito didn't move. "I'm not a *kid*." He nodded toward the man's shoulder. "And I'm pretty sure Futurists aren't supposed to bring outside tech into the palace."

"I was only sending a friendly message," the man replied easily.

"Friendly enough that you had to hide in the garden to send it?"



The man tilted his head. "No offense, but you don't seem much like an Imperial to me." He waved a hand over his own face for emphasis. "Most of them have a smugness about them. But you? You just seem curious. Plus, you know, you're still here, talking to me."

Kaito crossed his arms. "I wasn't born an Imperial. But this is my home now." Even as he said it, the words felt wrong. How could something true still feel so much like a lie?

"No parents, huh?" When Kaito didn't reply, the man shrugged. "Me neither. Mine died working in the factory. There was a toxic spill, and the sensors there were so old, nobody knew about the fumes until it was too late." He tensed his jaw. "Could've been prevented if they'd had access to better equipment, but with all the Imperial regulations and the cost of upgrading anything in the Undercity…" The man's voice trailed off, but he forced another grin. "I'm lucky I had extended family on Otawara. Otherwise, I might still be down there, fighting over outdated tech and struggling to keep a roof over my head."

Kaito didn't talk about his parents, and neither did Eiko. Not to anyone.

It felt wrong to complain, when the Imperials had given them a safe place to study, with plenty of food, and the kind of shelter some people on Kamigawa would willingly fight over.

And yet…

"There was an accident at the Towashi lab where my parents worked, and they were both exposed to radiation." Kaito stiffened. Saying the words out loud felt strange, and too much like a betrayal. What would Eiko say? Light-Paws? The Emperor?

But the words needed to come out. Maybe it was better Kaito was giving them to a stranger.

"Ah," the man said. "Hardly anyone in the Undercity can get the right med-tech for radiation poisoning. It's far too expensive."

Kaito's face flushed with a budding anger he didn't even know he'd had. "My dad—he *had* the med-tech. He was going to use it with my mom. But… it hadn't been approved yet."

"Black market?"

Kaito nodded. "My dad was arrested. He died in prison, and my mom died not long after."

The man's voice was edged with compassion. "It's not right that anyone should control who lives and who dies. Technology should be for the people. So they can look after themselves, when no one else will."

Kaito twisted his mouth. "But without regulations, anyone could build anything. Bad people could build weapons." There needed to be rules. Light-Paws had emphasized that point more than once.



The man clapped Kaito on the shoulder and leaned in. "That's what people say when they want to control you." He pulled his hand away and plucked another small origami crane drone from his armor. "Here. From one person the system failed to another."

Kaito took the gift, surprised by how comforting he found it. The Imperials had drones of their own, but this one felt different. It was a piece of a world Kaito had yet to see.

The moonfolk strode for the door, limbs flowing with grace despite the rough edges of his voice. "I'm late for a meeting. But it was chatting with you, kid."

"Not a kid," Kaito called after him.

The man laughed over his shoulder. "If you're ever looking for a job, I think the Futurists could use someone like you. Just ask for Katsumasa."

He disappeared into the building, and Kaito felt like the earth had shaken something free. Something he'd buried a long time ago, and was too afraid to revisit.

Until now.

He wished he had someone to talk to. But Eiko was dedicated to Imperial life—she would never understand the conflict in his heart. Neither would the Emperor. Not when she ruled Kamigawa, and believed so ful-

ly that controlling technology was the only way to maintain balance between the merging mortal and spirit realms.

Kaito watched the moth riders fly over the palace, wondering if Light-Paws would make sure that was him one day. A loyalist until the end.

But at least he'd be with the people he cared about. Maybe giving up a part of his heart wouldn't be so bad as long as he was fighting a battle that kept his family safe.

He'd already lost his parents. He wouldn't lose anyone else, ever again.

Tucking the crane drone into his pocket, Kaito sighed at the clouds, and remembered he had a meeting of his own. He climbed back up the wall and went to meet his friend.

...

The months passed slowly. Kaito never told anyone about the Futurist in the garden. It was a secret he carried with him. A secret that wouldn't leave his thoughts.

But he did tell the Emperor how his ideals were changing. She didn't agree, but she let him talk, and somehow that only gave his feelings more purpose. But even as his mind began to branch away from the Imperial teachings, the rest of his life seemed completely unchanged.



Until the day Kaito found Light-Paws standing in the sakura garden.

"Where's Swift-Arm?" Kaito tilted his head, puzzled. "Did our sparring lesson get cancelled?"

"There will be no more sparring lessons." Light-Paws tucked her hands in front of her. There was a time she seemed to tower over Kaito, but now they were the same height.

"I don't understand." Kaito's gaze trailed around the garden for the Emperor, but she wasn't there.

Light-Paws' nose twitched slightly. "You are nearly an adult, Kaito. There is no reason for you to be anyone's sparring partner. You must choose a path, and begin your own journey. Swift-Arm thinks you'd be a good fit for—"

"I don't want to be a samurai," Kaito interrupted. He hadn't even realized he'd made the decision until the words left his mouth.

But he was tired of hiding who he was, and how he felt.

Light-Paws' tails straightened behind her. "I know you and the Emperor have a friendship." Kaito looked away. "But it is time both of you focus on your duties to Kamigawa—the Emperor to her people, and you to the Emperor."

"I don't need to join the Golden-Tail Academy to do that," Kaito argued hotly.

"The Emperor has many enemies who wish her to fail," Light-Paws warned. "She needs samurai. *Loyalists*." She paused, voice sharpening like a blade. "Not a sparring partner more interested in filling her head with ideas about a different future."

Kaito's heart cracked down the middle. "She—she told you?" They'd spoken about so many things over the years, one shadow to another. They'd told each other their fears. Their hopes for the world.

But never once did Kaito think she would betray his feelings to Light-Paws.

"It is our duty to protect the Emperor, always. Privacy is an illusion for someone of her status." Light-Paws sighed, taking a step toward Kaito. "Perhaps I allowed you to hold on to your childhood for too long. It might've been better if I'd intervened, and put you on a better path."

"A better path?" Kaito choked, fists trembling. "You have no idea what that is!"

Light-Paws' dark eyes remained fixed. "Balance is the *only* path. The machines we build can change the world. That is a power that needs supervision."



"A single path only works when everyone is equal," Kaito shot back. "The Imperials are safe in Eiganjo. There is harmony with kami, and technology is available whenever they need it. But there are places on Kamigawa that don't have those luxuries. Who need to push the boundaries of tech, because their world isn't designed for comfort. And you shut it down—you *control* them because you can't imagine a world where a civilian might need to invent different equipment to keep themselves alive, and safe. You limit access to anyone who doesn't have the right permits, without any regard to those who can't afford them. Where's the balance in that? You are *killing* people and—"

"That is enough, Kaito," Light-Paws snapped, ears bent and nostrils flaring. "Those permits and regulations ensure technology is *safe*. You are using radical words that have no place in the Imperial palace."

"What you mean," Kaito replied bitterly, "is that *I* have no place here."

It was the first time Kaito had turned his back on his mentor. It didn't feel brave, or powerful, or overdue.

It felt like severing something that might never be repaired.

...

Kaito couldn't sleep that night. He tossed and turned for hours, trying not to think about what had fallen apart between him and Light-Paws.

When the alarm rang through the palace, he was already awake.

Tearing from his bed, Kaito grabbed his metal crane drone from the dresser. It had been modified for everyday use, and now fit comfortably against his wrist. He ran for the hallway; samurai and Imperial staff were everywhere, alerting one another and racing for their posts.

Kaito started to move toward Eiko's quarters, when he spotted one of the librarians running toward him. He held up an arm to stop her. "What's happened?"

She shook her head back and forth, the terror lingering in her eyes. "There's an intruder in the palace. They're saying the Uprisers are here!" Pushing his arm away, she bolted past him for safety.

Kaito hesitated. Nobody would be looking for Eiko. She'd be safe with the other diplomat students.

But the Emperor…

Kaito turned on his heels, searching for the nearest balcony. Samurai would be watching the halls, and the doorways, and the gates. But Kaito spent years running around the palace, moving in and out of places unseen.



*And the guards rarely watched the rooftops.*

Beneath the velvet and starlit sky, Kaito took the fastest route to the Emperor's chambers. His chest burned as he flew across the black tiles, eyes pinned on the garden where he'd spent so many afternoons. When he spotted the porch, there was no light spilling across the grass.

But the door was already opened.

Kaito leapt from the wall, rolling into a careful stop at the bottom step. He tiptoed silently, pausing at the door, and removed the metal drone from his wrist. It folded itself into an origami crane and flew straight for the shadows.

He pressed a finger to the chip against his temple that let him see through the drone's camera. The Emperor wasn't there, and neither was the intruder. But the door to Kyodai's chamber was also open, and inside, moonlight swept across the floor.

A sound echoed through the room—like three voices crying at once. A shout, a song, and a whisper, all of them edged in pain.

Kaito didn't care about waiting on the drone to show him what was behind the door. He ran to the sound. Because if Kyodai was in trouble, then the Emperor…

He skidded to a halt when he reached the grand chamber, just as the drone landed back on his wrist. An indoor hot spring pooled in the distance, the fog blanketed across the water, making it appear as if the room stretched on for an eternity.

Kaito had never laid eyes on Kyodai before. The guardian spirit of Kamigawa only spoke through the Emperor—*channeled* herself through the Emperor in a way no one else could ever experience. Not without the great kami's blessing, which was only meant to be given upon the Emperor's death.

The kami was enormous, with hundreds of golden, human-sized arms forming her belly and limbs. Gold spheres trailed along the fans at her back, with a large black one embedded in her forehead. With a pointed mouth like a dragon, three masks lined Kyodai's face. They represented Michiko Konda—the first Emperor to channel with Kyodai.

Kaito's gaze trailed to the massive central machine hanging from the ceiling. It was once told to him that Kyodai would cling to it like an enormous cable, almost as if she were keeping herself separate from the mortal world below.

But now Kyodai writhed in the water, lashing at the fog like she was hurting, and confused.

The Emperor was nowhere to be found.





*"Kyodai, Soul of Kamigawa", by Daniel Zrom.*

Kaito was ready to call the guards—to shout for them to come quickly, and see what was wrong with Kyodai—when he saw a strange man rise out of the fog from beside the kami's body.

A man dressed in chrome armor like nothing Kaito had ever seen before, and a metal arm that pulsed with purple energy, the ends forming a monstrous claw.

When he locked eyes with Kaito, they glowed an otherworldly pink.

With a sneer, the man leapt from the fog and toward the open balcony. Kaito had no weapon, but it didn't matter; he wouldn't let the intruder escape, no matter what it cost.

He chased after him onto the rooftops. The tiles broke beneath the stranger's weight. He was too fast, and too determined.

But Kaito was determined, too.

Eyeing a loose tile, Kaito flung his hand forward and sent the object sailing through the air. It shattered against the side of the stranger's head.

But it barely seemed to hurt him at all. The man with the metal arm spun, teeth bared, and then dropped his gaze to Kaito's wrist. A sneer formed across his mouth, and he flicked his fingers at the air.

Kaito felt his wrist tug, and then he was yanked from the roof, flailing as he tried to grab for the ledge—for anything at all—before his body fell through the air.

His back hit the sand garden with a *thud*. Kaito winced, tearing the metal drone from his wrist like he wasn't sure if it had been compromised, and hobbled back to the wall, climbing as quickly as his injured body would allow.

When he reached the roof pitch, the man was already gone.



By the time he returned to Kyodai's chambers, where all the high-ranking guards and advisors were waiting, he realized the Emperor was gone, too.

The Imperials spoke over one another, trying to figure out what to do—what had *happened*. They barely paid Kaito any attention at all, too busy trying to blame the attack on the Uprisers.

"I saw him," Kaito argued. "The person who did something with the Emperor. He had a metal arm, and glowing eyes—he wasn't an Upriser." He *couldn't* have been. Not with those strange clothes and a power over technology Kaito had never witnessed before.

Light-Paws appeared with all seven tails fanned out behind her. "A metal arm?"

Kaito nodded, relieved. Light-Paws would believe him. She'd listen to him. She'd understand that—

She turned to the other advisors. "Perhaps the Futurists are responsible for this. They may have used an unregulated prosthetic device to kidnap the Emperor, to try and force her to change the laws."

"What? No! That's not what happened," Kaito said pleadingly. "It wasn't the Futurists. I know what I saw!"

But Light-Paws wasn't listening. She was busy convening with the Imperials, figuring out who to blame, and how to retaliate.

Kyodai shuddered in the distance, swaying like she didn't understand what was happening, or where she was.

Maybe even *who* she was.

Was it possible that somewhere out in the world, the Emperor was just as scared and confused?

Kaito's face burned. There was raw fury in his voice. "You're looking in the wrong direction. You're trying to blame the Futurists instead of chasing after the man I saw—the man I know is responsible for this."

Nobody stopped to listen. Not to Kaito.

He shouted over the noise and the fog. "He's getting away. If someone doesn't do something, we might never see the Emperor again!"

Light-Paws turned, eyes admonishing. "Go to your room, Kaito. This is an Imperial matter."

Kaito felt it then—what he'd always known.

He didn't belong here.

He never did.



Tearing himself away from the temple, he didn't stop the angry tears from falling down his cheeks. And by the time he reached his room, he knew what he had to do.

It would break his heart to leave Eiko, but she had a place in Eiganjo. She had a purpose.

And even if it wasn't the one he wanted, now Kaito had a purpose, too.

He would search Kamigawa for the man with the metal arm. He would find his friend, and bring her home. And for as long as he could help it, he would never step foot in the palace again.

That night, Kaito climbed his final wall in Eiganjo, and he didn't look back.

# EPISODE II
# Lies, Promises, and Neon Flames

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KAITO LEARNS A CLOSE FRIEND MAY HAVE BETRAYED HIM.
HE INVESTIGATES AND DISCOVERS A THREAT
KAMIGAWA HAS NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

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Ten years had passed since Kaito left the walls of Eiganjo, but some habits were hard to break.

Rain danced across the roof tiles like a song. Kaito leaned forward, brows pinched as he searched the streets below.

Towashi was filled with even more color than usual. A parade of modified umbrellas seemed to float across the pavement, each of them glowing with a shield of neon energy that kept the people beneath them dry. A glass panel crackled with life as the evening menu for a teahouse rolled across the screen. Overhead, a pair of massive, fiery orange koi flicked their silken tails as they swam toward an ocean of sky and starlight.

Normally Kaito loved the vibrancy of Towashi at night, but he didn't have time for nostalgia. He was looking for someone.



*"Kaito Shizuki", by Yongjae Choi.*



Kaito pressed a finger to his temple, and the live feed from his drone appeared in his vision. The device was hovering above a darkened alley, and Kaito ushered the tanuki-shaped drone toward the bustling, rainbow-hued street.

A decade in technological advancements meant it was far more sophisticated than the origami crane drone from Kaito's childhood. The crane had been easy to recycle. But Kaito wasn't sure he'd ever be able to replace his current drone, no matter how outdated she would someday become.

The tanuki and Kaito had too much history.

Tameshi warned him not to get attached to a single piece of tech. "Everything *new someday becomes old,"* his friend had said.

Most of the time Kaito was happy to listen to Tameshi's wisdom. He'd been both a friend and a mentor over the years. But Tameshi had also spent his life trying not to get attached to anyone, or anything.

Kaito was the opposite. He felt tethered to the people he cared about most, and he'd do anything to protect those bonds.

The tanuki drone, Himoto, was more than just a piece of tech—she represented the kami who had changed Kaito's life forever.

It was also a reminder that his friend was still missing.

The drone stilled near a corner before making her way down a row of street venders, all of them sheltered by glowing canopies edged with hanging lanterns.

A Kami of Street Vendors sat moodily at the edge of a counter, its dough-like face puckered into a frown. Three gyoza hovered around him like they were teetering on the edge of hope.

The nearby vendor scooped a generous portion of ramen into a bowl before adding bright pink and white fishcake, slices of boiled egg, and a sprinkle of green onion across the top—all cooked to perfection. He passed the meal to a waiting customer, and the kami let out a disappointed moan.

Even through the drone's camera, Kaito caught the worry in the vendor's eye. Kami were everywhere on Kamigawa, but not everyone wanted to eat a meal beside a spirit with a temper. Sometimes it was better to keep them happy.

With a sigh, the man reached behind the counter for his own bowl of bloated noodles that had been sitting in hot broth for far too long. The kami's pudgy face morphed into pure delight, and the dish barely touched the counter before he threw his face into the ramen and slurped furiously.

The vendor rolled his eyes and turned to his next customer.



Kaito nudged the drone skyward toward the height of the nearby buildings. With a bird's-eye view, they scanned the city, searching the alleys one by one until he spotted a group of Imperial samurai standing outside of an apartment. Most of the upper windows were sealed shut with their curtains drawn, but one had been left slightly ajar. The gap was so small, it was hardly noticeable to the average person.

Kaito cracked a half-smile. He didn't see the impossible—he saw an invitation.

He tapped his temple again, shutting off the drone's visuals, and slid down the roof tiles and onto the balcony below. Following the railing to the corner of the building, Kaito slipped through the bars and scaled the wall back down to the pavement, losing himself in the nearby crowd.

Nobody noticed the drone approaching, or how Kaito snatched the device from the air in one fluid motion. In his hands, the metal shifted like paper, folding and refolding again until she became a mask.

The embodiment of the tanuki-shaped kami that caused Kaito's spark to ignite.

He'd become a Planeswalker that day. Someone destined for greatness even beyond the borders of Kamigawa.

Kaito brushed a finger against the edge of the device. He'd followed the Kami of the Spark all the way to Boseiju hoping to find the Emperor. But it wasn't his friend that was waiting for him in the forest district—it was his fate.

He shrugged against the rain, pressed the mask to his face, and straightened his hood. Kaito didn't care about greatness; he just wanted his friend back.

Kaito left the streets for the shadows like an undetectable wraith. Turning corner after corner, he followed the alleyways toward the heart of Towashi. When he reached the looming apartment building, he began to climb.

The Imperial samurai were posted at the door. He could hear the shift of their metal armor every time they moved. Armor made for battle, not stealth.

*So much unnecessary noise,* Kaito thought to himself before swinging over the ledge and planting his feet on the small balcony.

Time had changed him. He was no longer a child, or an Imperial.

But he was still the Kaito who climbed across rooftops and snuck through windows he wasn't supposed to.

Pushing the glass with his gloved hand, Kaito slipped into the room without making a sound.



The bedroom crackled with firelight. Kaito sensed movement, gaze snapping toward the hearth. He expected to find a kami nestled inside the flame, but there was no one there. Just an amber glow that caused shadows to flicker across the wall.

"Don't worry," a familiar voice said. "We're alone."

Kaito lifted a brow, but didn't turn. "It was thoughtful of you to leave the window open."

There was an irritated huff. "We both know you weren't planning on using the front door. If your interplanar travels didn't teach you a thing about etiquette, I'm sure it's pointless to even hope."

"If I really wanted to learn about etiquette," Kaito began, turning to face his sister, "I'd have come straight to you."

Eiko's lips curled into a smile. "It's good to see you."

Kaito pushed his tanuki mask behind his head. "It's good to see you too." He hesitated, trying to piece together the joy of seeing his sister with the reality of who she grew up to become. He didn't hate that she was an Imperial, but he hated the distance that came with it. "I know you don't leave the palace much these days."

"It's difficult," Eiko admitted. "Risona has supporters all over Kamigawa—not just the Asari Uprisers in the Sokenzan mountains, but spies in

Towashi and the Undercity, too. It… isn't always safe for someone like me to travel without protection."

"I remember you being quite capable of taking care of yourself," Kaito countered.

"I'm an Imperial Advisor now. There is more to consider than just myself," she said quietly.

Kaito twisted his mouth. Her words reminded him of someone. Someone he hadn't spoken to since the day he fled Eiganjo. "Is Light-Paws here with you?"

Their paths hadn't crossed in a decade. Kaito wasn't *intentionally* avoiding his former teacher, but he also wasn't looking for a reunion. Because when it came to Light-Paws, Kaito still felt the hurt like a bruise beneath the surface.

Eiko shook her head. "Light-Paws doesn't have time for diplomacy meetings. She's too busy trying to prevent a rebellion, and keep the rest of the court from turning on each other in their bid to gain more power." There was an edge of frustration in her voice. "The Asari Uprisers grow bolder every day. The longer the throne remains empty, the more Risona is able to gain supporters who believe the empire should be abolished."



As much as Kaito believed the Imperials could be restrictive, he never wanted a complete end to the Imperial's guidance. They played an important role when it came to negotiating with the kami. And the last thing Kaito wanted was for Kamigawa to break out in violence.

"The Emperor will come home." Kaito's throat tightened at the memory of what he lost. What *Kamigawa* lost.

He'd traveled across the Multiverse to find her, but he was no closer than he had been when his spark ignited. All Kaito knew was that the man with the metal arm was a Planeswalker.

Which meant the Emperor could be anywhere.

Eiko nodded solemnly. "I hope you're right. For Kamigawa's sake, and yours."

Kaito looked away. Sometimes, when the days were long and the evenings quiet, the ache in his heart felt just as powerful as it had been when he'd stood in Kyodai's chamber and realized his friend was gone.

But now was not the time for aching hearts. It had been months since he'd seen his sister—he didn't want to waste their time together being sad.

"You always did love to worry about me." He turned back, lifting a brow like he was baiting her. "Is that why you risked sending an Imperial drone all the way to Towashi?"

Eiko pursed her lips. Their dynamic was familiar—it made it easy to fall back into old habits. And banter had always been one of their favorites. "You are not the only one with eyes in this city, Kaito. If you were in trouble, I would know about it."

The words slipped out of Kaito's mouth too easily. "I didn't realize I'd have to leave this plane just to get a bit of privacy."

Eiko blinked. "You wouldn't leave again without saying goodbye." It wasn't a question; it was a reminder of Kaito's promise.

He didn't regret leaving the palace, but he did regret how he'd left Eiko without any warning at all.

They'd come a long way since then. Eiko had been in Boseiju with Kaito when they'd been tracking the Kami of the Spark. She was the only Imperial on Kamigawa who believed he was right about the man with the metal arm having something to do with the Emperor's disappearance.

But some memories left their marks. And sometimes those marks stung.

Kaito lifted his shoulders, sheepish. "Oh, come on. You must've forgiven me by now. I basically saved your life in the forest district. *Twice*."

"That's not even close to what happened. You were barreling through kami territory without any sense at all. You're lucky you even survived long enough to ignite that spark of yours."



"You always were my favorite kami diplomat."

"I'd say flattery will get you nowhere, but we both know that's pretty much the only card you have."

His laugh echoed through the space. "You wound me."

Fire flickered in Eiko's glimmering stare. "I've heard the rumors about Futurists looking into illegal bio-enhancements that can mess with the physics of reality. Perhaps you could ask your friends to help you grow thicker skin."

Kaito's smile faded slightly. Another memory that carried a sting. "We're not the villains, you know. We believe experimenting with technology is the way forward—not to hurt people, or start wars, but to help. To *heal*."

"We already *have* tech for that."

"Yes, but who has access to it? Anyone who can't afford permits or upgraded motherboards has to hope for a kami's blessing to have any kind of power. And we both know how rare that is."

"Have you ever stopped to think that maybe not everyone *should* have access to power?" Eiko countered. "The Imperials are not trying to be regressive. But we have merge gates to build and protect, and kami who already see our expanding cities as a threat to their homes. What happens if they start to see our inventions as a threat to their existence?" She shook

her head. “For the good of both the mortal and spirit realms, there needs to be a balance.”

“Giving power to a few will always create a divide. Technology levels the playing field. Not just for the wealthy and the elite, but for *everyone*. We no longer have to rely on kami magic—we can protect ourselves.”

“Who is it you need protecting from so badly? Because last I checked, the only people trying to start a war are the ones who want the same thing you do,” Eiko remarked coolly.

“I do not support the Uprisers,” Kaito said clearly. “But Kyodai hasn’t been herself since the Emperor vanished. What happens if something goes wrong with the merge gates and destructive kami are unleashed? It could take a millennia for the mortal and spirit worlds to become one. That’s a thousand years of uncertainty. The Kami Wars may be legend, but can you honestly guarantee we won’t see a threat like that again?”

Eiko stiffened. “The kami are not our enemy.”

“We don’t even *know* who our enemy is.” Kaito stilled, swallowing the lump in his throat. “The Emperor was taken from Kyodai’s temple, and no one even saw it happen.”

He hadn’t been able to stop it. He’d been too late, too weak, and too unprepared.



They all had.

Eiko’s face hardened. “There was nothing you could’ve done that night.”

“If we’d had better tech—”

“Unregulated tech might very well have been how the Emperor was taken in the first place!” Eiko interjected, cheeks turning pink.

Kaito scowled. “The Imperials already blamed the Futurists—and the Uprisers—without a shred of evidence. They almost caused a *war*.”

Eiko was silent for too many seconds.

Kaito saw the hesitation in his sister’s eyes. She was holding something back. “What have you heard?” He blinked, hope crashing against his rib-cage like a tidal wave. “Do you know where the Emperor is?”

“No,” Eiko said. “But I received some intelligence.” Even in the firelight, Kaito could see the strain behind her eyes.

Whatever she knew, she wasn’t supposed to tell Kaito.

He took a step forward, urgent. “If this is about the Emperor—”

“It’s about Tameshi,” Eiko interrupted.

Kaito’s thoughts stalled. He wasn’t sure he’d heard her right. “What does Tameshi have to do with any of this?”



*"Tameshi, Reality Architect", by Scott M. Fischer.*

Eiko's eyes latched to the doorway. Kaito had never seen her so nervous. She reached inside her robes and pulled out a small device shaped like a paper fan. With a brush of her thumb, the edges expanded into a small dome. Energy radiated outward, creating a cocoon of white light around the siblings.

"A noise suppressor?" Kaito folded his arms across his chest. "This must be serious if you don't even trust your guards."



Eiko took a slow breath. "My sources have been watching Tameshi for some time. He is involved in trading illegal merge studies involving kami, and—"

"If you think I'm going to provide information on my *best friend* to the Imperials, you are sorely mistaken." Kaito gritted his teeth. "Eiko, you're my sister, and I love you. But if you're asking me to be your spy…"

"I'm not telling you this because I want your help. I'm not supposed to be telling you this at *all*. But—" Eiko pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's not just the merge studies. It's who he was with." She sighed, dropping her hand. "Tameshi was seen meeting with a man in the Undercity. A man with a metal arm."

The fire snapped behind him, but Kaito could feel embers burning in his own chest. A flame of defiance. "Whatever your sources think they saw, they're wrong."

Tameshi had met them both in the forest district. He knew about the Emperor, and the kami, and the man Kaito was searching for. There wasn't a single secret Kaito kept from his friend—not then, and not now.

It didn't make sense that Tameshi would hide something so important. He *couldn't* have.

"Believe me, I would never share intel with you if I wasn't absolutely certain it was true." Eiko's shoulders fell. "Especially not about this."

Kaito's voice was hollow. "Tameshi wouldn't betray me."

"I'm telling you what I know," Eiko said. "Ten years ago, you swore you would never stop looking for the Emperor. If Tameshi knows the man with the metal arm and never told you, don't you want to find out why?"

"I won't feed you intel," Kaito said seriously. "And I won't turn in my friend to be used as a scapegoat."

"I'm not asking you to. We want the same thing—to find the Emperor, as soon as possible. I'm simply giving you the information you need to do the right thing. To find out the *truth*."

Kaito looked away bitterly. There must've been another explanation. Tameshi would never lie to him. He would never betray him.

Would he?

"Kamigawa needs a ruler," Eiko said carefully. "Someone to restore the balance between our people."

Kaito tilted his chin, facing his sister. "I don't believe a throne is the key to restoring balance. But I will do whatever it takes to find the Emperor."

He'd trusted Tameshi for a long time.



But he'd trusted Eiko much longer.

Whether her intel was right or wrong, Kaito believed in his sister enough to follow the trail. And if spying on his best friend was the only way to prove his innocence, then Tameshi would just have to forgive him.

Kaito moved for the window, leaving the protection of the dome behind him.

Eiko flicked the metal fan closed before tucking it back into her robes. "I'm sorry, Kaito." He paused near the ledge, listening to her somber voice. "I know what he means to you."

Kaito didn't want to believe it. But if Tameshi really was working with the man with the metal arm, and if he'd had knowledge of what happened to the Emperor all this time…

Then maybe their friendship was never what Kaito had thought.

…

Kaito stood at the edge of the alley, back pressed against the stone wall. Otawara was high up in the clouds, and sometimes Kaito was convinced the floating city had less shadows because of it, and far fewer places to hide.

His tanuki drone was too recognizable to be any help around Tameshi, so Kaito had to tail him the old-fashioned way—with his eyes, ears, and pure determination. As the weeks passed and he continued to gather information, Kaito found himself hating the new mask he wore.

The mask of a liar.

It hurt to teeter on the edge of betraying his friend. More than once, Kaito nearly convinced himself it was all a misunderstanding. That Eiko



*"Otawara, Soaring City", by Alayna Danner.*



has been wrong, and that it couldn't have been the same Planeswalker he saw in Kyodai's temple.

But every piece of intel Kaito uncovered only confirmed what his sister had told him.

Tameshi was definitely hiding something. Not just from Kaito, but from the other Futurists, too.

Kaito watched him day after day, working at the Futurist department like his beliefs were aligned with the rest of Otawara. And then the sun would set, and when everyone else went home, Tameshi stayed inside his lab, carrying on with a project no one else in the compound seemed to know about.

Kaito had seen Tameshi making handshake deals in dark alleys for stolen power-enhancers. He'd watched his friend sneak boxes of cargo into his secretive workplace in the dead of night. And he'd watched the unregulated drones leave the compound and head straight for the Towashi Undercity.

It was evidence Tameshi was doing something illegal. But Kaito needed proof of his *betrayal*.

Tameshi appeared in the compound's main entrance, drone already unfolded in his hand. With a gentle push, he sent the ribbon-like dragon

into the air, watching as it arched beyond the trees in search of the world below. He checked the panel on his sleeve, observing the time, and in one graceful step he flew into the air and vanished toward the horizon.

Kaito didn't wait long. There was no one else around; Tameshi's colleagues had gone home hours before. He removed a device from his belt—a small throwing star that glowed blue along the edges—and aimed for the nearest security camera. He flicked his wrist sharply, and the star spun through the air before attaching itself to the camera's side. It blinked once. Twice.

And then the glowing edges turned green.

Masked with his hood pulled tight, Kaito left the alley and walked straight through the front doors of Tameshi's compound. No camera would see him now—not with the device freezing the footage.

But he needed to be quick. There was no way of knowing when Tameshi would be back.

The tiled floors echoed like bone, cold and empty. Kaito fought the chill running through him. It wasn't his first time inside the compound, but it was the first time he felt like an outsider.

*Like a traitor,* his mind hummed, and he tried to push it away.



If Kaito was wrong about Tameshi, he would accept the consequences that might come his way. But if Tameshi had lied to him all this time…

Kaito wasn't ready to face the truth, but for the Emperor's sake, he would do it anyway.

He passed the metal door leading to Tameshi's lab without a second glance. There was no point trying to break in—not without a key card, or a giant mech.

And Kaito didn't think blowing the lab to pieces would do much good from an evidence standpoint.

Instead, Kaito headed straight for Tameshi's office. An enormous desk sat in the center, toppled with a combination of data chips and paperwork. A round lantern sat in the corner, and Kaito pressed a finger against the side to bring it to life. Using his telekinesis, Kaito lifted the lantern into the air until it hovered steadily beside him.

He looked through every drawer and cabinet in the room, and went over every scrap of paper on Tameshi's desk. Most of it was unimportant, but there was a coded message that Kaito found tucked beneath a file. It didn't take Kaito long to decipher it—he'd learned every trick Tameshi was willing to teach him.

It was vague as far as messages went, but it seemed to be a request to meet in the Undercity. It was a long way for a meeting; the Undercity was on the surface, wedged between the shadows of Boseiju—the oldest and largest living tree on Kamigawa—and Towashi's skyscrapers. Certainly not a practical location for run-of-the-mill business.

To go so far from Otawara… It implied an even greater need for secrecy than the average Futurist required.

Kaito drummed his fingers along the edge of the desk, frowning at the message as he double-checked the date and time. The meeting was happening tonight, and soon—it must have been where Tameshi was headed.

But who was he meeting? And why?

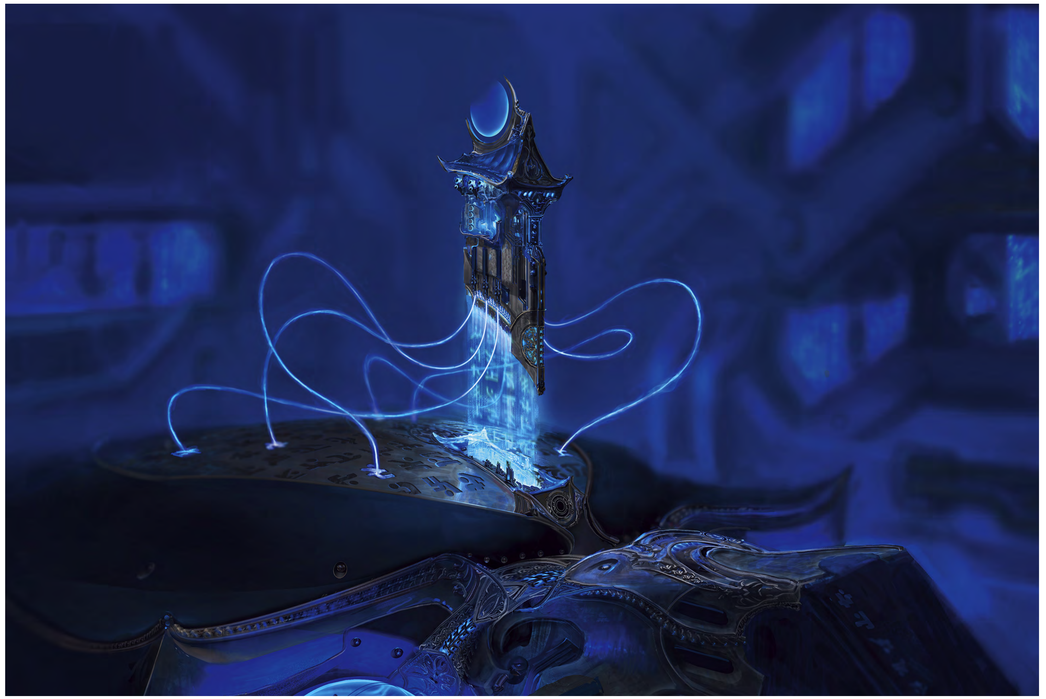
Kaito was about to stand, when he spotted a data chip tucked behind some of the paperwork. He connected it with his tanuki mask, took a few moments to bypass the encryption, and watched as the image appeared on the inside panel.

It was a blueprint of a strange device, thin and square, with wire-like arms reaching out of it like a jellyfish. Kaito had never seen anything like it before.

But it still didn't prove that Tameshi knew the man with the metal arm.

For that, Kaito would have to crash a meeting in the Undercity.





*"The Reality Chip", by Campbell White.*

Kaito removed the data chip from his tanuki mask and tucked it beneath the pages. He stepped away from the desk and flexed his fingers, sending the lantern back into its cradle, and hurried outside.

When he was safely through the doors, Kaito flicked his fingers, and the device unlatched from the camera and floated back to him. He plucked it from the air, shoved it in his belt, and headed for the sky ferry.

…

Kaito skirted through the belly of the Undercity with ease. Even if it hadn't been the middle of the night, no sunlight ever made it to the surface, and the neon city lights didn't seem to reach the narrower streets. The murky waterways were blanketed by cherry blossoms, but even the charming aesthetics couldn't mask the stench of sweat and sewage in the air.

It didn't take long to track Tameshi—moonfolk didn't often venture into the Undercity, and more than one stranger was happy to trade intel for a small fee.

Kaito followed his friend's trail all the way to the docks. Light sources were scarce at the edge of the city, and the canal water was nearly pitch-black. Kaito could taste an unpleasant sourness on his lips—the chemical stain that came from being so close to the Undercity sewers.

He grimaced, keeping his hands loose at his sides, ready to reach for his sword at the first sign of trouble. He didn't know what he'd find, but if he saw the man with the metal arm again, he wasn't planning on letting him get away.

The steam from the nearby vents helped mask Kaito's footsteps as he wandered across the edge of the docks. Metal containers were stacked in uniform rows, offering plenty of places to hide. But Kaito's attention was pinned on the warehouse up ahead, where light spilled out of a pair of wide, bay doors.



Kaito removed his mask, letting her transform back into a four-legged drone. Silently, Himoto flew toward the warehouse. At the same time, Kaito reached for the sword at his back. With a flick of the handle, the edges expanded into two rows of sharp, jagged teeth.

Tightening his grip, Kaito crept after the drone and pressed a finger to his temple.

Inside the warehouse, the tanuki drone floated toward a dark space above the rafters. Metal crates filled most of the room, but at the far end was an open area filled with tables and lab equipment. Glowing beakers were contorted around one another like a maze of glass. Some of them bubbled with neon liquid, and others sparked with energy. Surgical instruments littered the surface—there were oddly shaped knives that looked like wide triangles, and others that were thin as twigs. Smaller beakers filled with strange, metallic-hued serums were laid out on a worktable, and fragments of metal and frayed wires surrounded each other like puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit.

Unease ran through Kaito's bones. These experiments… They looked nothing like the Futurist work he'd seen on Otawara. Or *anywhere* on Kamigawa, for that matter.

Kaito ushered Himoto closer to the lab equipment when an enormous shadow made him stop. He could hear voices from the doorway. An argument that had long been underway.

Even with the drone's camera, all Kaito could see below was a too-large shadow. When it shifted, Kaito heard an unnatural tremor in the figure's voice, like metal grating against metal.

"The fleshling's previous utility is irrelevant. Doubt and weakness must be excised from the whole."



*"Planar Incision", by Joshua Raphael.*



There was a shuffle of footsteps near one of the containers, and a gruff voice mumbled something Kaito couldn't hear.

The enormous figure shifted once more, stepping further into the light. Kaito held his breath as a strange monster appeared. Its body was made up of chrome, with clawed arms and a curved spine. Exposed ribs and pointed vertebrae were displayed like metalwork. His face and mouth were monstrous and bird-like, with too many sharp points and long, flat teeth that made Kaito stumble backward, even outside the warehouse.

This wasn't the man with the metal arm Kaito had seen in Kyodai's temple. This was something else entirely.

The creature moved across the space with an unnatural gait, and Kaito pulled his drone further into the shadows for cover.

"Finalize collecting the necessary materials, and transfer the acquired specimens." The monster turned, jaws opening as the metallic rattle of his voice made Kaito's stomach go hollow. "Do not slow the progress. The subjects regaining a fully conscious state is an inevitable outcome."

A group of henchmen appeared on the drone's camera. Reckoners, by the look of their clothing. There were nearly a dozen of them, hurriedly shuffling equipment from the table and into a waiting vehicle. They left the beakers behind, still bubbling with color, and began shifting one of the larger containers toward the vehicle instead.

*The perfect size to store some kind of weapon,* Kaito thought blandly. *What has Tameshi gotten involved in?*

The henchman had the cargo partially loaded into the vehicle when a scream rang out from inside. Kaito's heart pinched at the thought of the Emperor in a cage somewhere too, but the noises inside the cargo were more animal than human.

They sounded like *kami*.

He wanted to investigate. He knew whatever was inside the container could provide answers about what was going on in the warehouse.

But there was no time, and Kaito couldn't take on a dozen Reckoners and a monster all by himself.

"What do we do about the beakers?" one of the henchmen asked.

The creature made its way toward the vehicle without looking back. "All evidence must be eradicated. Expansion of the work will continue in a more optimal location, courtesy of the fleshing."

With a sneer, the Reckoner turned, picked up one of the solo beakers, and threw it against the rest of the glass with force.



The explosion made Kaito jump in alarm, grip tightening around his sword. He blinked quickly, pressing his temple to call his drone back, and listened to the rumble of the vehicle as it sped away.

The angry snap and hiss of the fire was a warning.

But there was also evidence inside. Evidence that was being destroyed.

Kaito ran into the warehouse without another thought, hurrying toward the colorful flames that were already climbing up the side of the warehouse. In a few more minutes, the entire building would be engulfed.

His eyes scanned the tables for something to grab—something that could help him—but everything that was left behind was already burning, too fierce and bright to stop.

Kaito's shoulders fell, just as a moan sounded somewhere behind him.

He spun, sword raised, and saw Tameshi slumped in the corner beside one of the containers. The fabric of his robes had been slashed across the middle, clawed by a metal arm. His face had paled to a shade Kaito had never seen on his friend before. And all around him, blood began to pool.

Tameshi was mortally wounded.

Shoving his sword back into its hilt, Kaito ran to his friend's side and sank to his knees. There were so many things he wanted to say. So many things he wanted to ask.

But in that moment, his heart felt as shattered as the glass burning behind him, and he didn't have any words at all.

Tameshi lifted his head, eyes fighting to stay open. "Kaito…"

Kaito shook his head again and again. This couldn't be happening. He would not lose another friend.

But death had other plans.

Tameshi's voice was as faint as ash. "I—I've made so many mistakes. But lying to you was the worst of them."

Kaito felt the fire roar behind him. He couldn't move Tameshi—it would only speed up the inevitable. And if seconds were all he had left…

He wanted to tell him not to worry. To give him peace and forgiveness in those final moments. To give him everything a friend deserved.

But he had another friend too. And there was still time to help her.

"Tell me what you know about the Emperor," Kaito begged, fighting the sting in his eyes. "How do you know the man with the metal arm?"



Tameshi's eyes fluttered.

"No!" Kaito grabbed his friend's robes and tugged. "Don't you go yet. Not without telling me the truth."

Tameshi's last breath halted like the last whisper of a fight. He stared up at Kaito with so much broken, irreparable regret.

He was out of time.

"Tezzeret," Tameshi whispered like he was breaking a spell. And then he was gone.

Kaito's cry became a choked gasp, and the tears streaming down his cheeks felt like they were being seared into his skin. He felt the heat reach his back, the fire growing dangerously close.

Clenching his teeth, Kaito pressed his hand to Tameshi's eyes and mouthed a silent goodbye. Even though it felt wrong, he reached into his friend's pocket and removed the key card to his lab.

Tameshi may be dead—but Kaito had more to do.

His tanuki drone appeared at his side, folding itself back into a mask. Kaito covered his face and stood over his friend's body, fighting the anguish that rocked his shoulders, and walked away.

Behind him, the warehouse blazed.

# EPISODE III
# An Unexpected Alliance

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ARMED ONLY WITH A NAME, KAITO SEARCHES FOR CLUES. HIS JOURNEY TAKES HIM BACK TO OTAWARA WHERE HE CONFRONTS ANOTHER PLANESWALKER, TAMIYO.

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Sunlight spilled through the trees, rippling over the bog. Kaito didn't wander from the road. He knew even the most innocent looking flower could be deadly in the swamp.

The nezumi had never made it a secret they didn't like visitors; using the poisonous landscape to their advantage was the perfect deterrent. And under normal circumstances, Kaito would never have risked venturing so deep into their territory.

But the key to finding Tezzeret was with the nezumi.

After Tameshi's death, Kaito had spent weeks tracking down every scrap of information he could find on Tezzeret. He'd gone to Otawara's libraries, scoured every archive, and spoke with some of Kamigawa's most revered Living Historians.



*"Tezzeret, Betrayer of Flesh", by Bryan Sola.*



Tezzeret did not exist on any data drive.

But he *did* exist in a memory.

A Historian who performed in one of Towashi's oldest theaters spoke of a village inhabited by the Nezumi-Katsuro gang. It had burned down five years before, attacked by forces that were never held accountable.

One of the survivors was a child called Nashi, whose parents had tried to get him to safety when the attack began. Nashi had only made it to the edge of the village when he watched in terror as his mother was burned alive and sparks of fire ignited every hut around him.

The nezumi village burned through the night, and after the fire cleared and the survivors gathered near the ashes, Nashi listened to the adults whisper the name of the man who ordered the attack.

They called him Tezzeret—and he'd been betrayed by his subordinates, who left him braindead in the burned village for the nezumi to find. They kept Tezzeret until the day a dragon arrived and bargained for his body.

The nezumi feared retribution from Tezzeret's organization. They were afraid that if anyone found out there were survivors, someone might return to finish the job. So the nezumi did the only thing they could—they helped the child become a ghost. Then they became ghosts, too.

They could hide for the rest of their lives, but Nashi had no surviving family. It was kinder to send him far from the swamp, where Tezzeret's organization would never be able to find him, and he'd have the opportunity to start over.

But the nezumi from the neighboring villages would not talk to Kaito. Not just about Nashi, but about *anything*. They shouted curses and slammed their doors and even threatened to poison him if he didn't leave. Judging by the number of toxic flowers along the road, he didn't doubt they were serious.

Kaito had no friends in the swamp. But there were answers here, and he wasn't ready to turn back before he found them.

Adjusting his tanuki mask, he followed the broken road across the murky water. The translucent strip of energy was enough to keep Kaito dry, but he eyed the glowing yellow cracks nervously. If the road gave way, there was nothing to keep him above ground.

Being eaten alive by poisonous eels wasn't exactly the end Kaito had pictured for himself. Not that he had an aversion to eel; he was quite fond of them when they were roasted with sesame oil and wrapped in rice and seaweed.

Kaito hurried to the next shoreline. Massive roots protruded from the ground like a mess of tangled yarn, blocking the glowing road



ahead. A smaller footpath was all that remained, covered in pebbles and flattened mulch.

Kaito followed the trail until he reached a village. It was smaller than some of the others, with houses made up of straw roofs and sliding paper doors. Houses that would easily fall apart if the wind swept in too fast.

*Or a fire*, Kaito thought grimly.

What happened to Nashi's family was violent. Maybe even vengeful.

Kaito needed to know why—and how it connected to Tameshi, and the monster he saw at the docks.

How it connected to the *Emperor*.

A wide dirt path cut through the center of the village. At the far end was a junkyard, full of metal scraps and outdated bits of machine.

It was long-rumored that nezumi in the swamps were experimenting with unregulated tech. They often traded their creations with the Okiba Reckoners—a biker gang that was exclusively nezumi—in exchange for a near-constant flow of stolen goods.

But Kaito was a Futurist, whose core beliefs were to push the limits of technology for the greater good.

Who was he to judge what the nezumi got up to?

An older, gray nezumi stood behind a wooden fence, the fur around her mouth peppered in silver. Her claws were wrapped around the handle of a gardening tool, the serrated blade shaped like a pincer and attached to a metal box that thrummed with energy.

"You're not welcome here," she barked.

Kaito hesitated, glancing at the jagged blade. It could easily be used as a weapon.

The nezumi narrowed her dark pink eyes. "It's for harvesting mushrooms. Cuts the stems just right to keep the spores from releasing." Her nose twitched. "If you're here to check our permits—"

"I'm not," Kaito said quickly, holding his hands in front of him, hoping to show he wasn't a threat. Not currently, anyway.

His enemies were more monster than rodent.

She sniffed at the air. "Humans don't travel all the way out here unless it's for their own benefit." She flashed her yellow teeth. "We've never been worth the inconvenience."

"Your stolen goods and illegal side-projects are not my concern. I'm here for information." Kaito let the silence follow. It was a risk to call out the nezumi so brazenly, but he'd dealt with enough of them in Towashi to know they respected brutal honesty far more than sugar-coated words.



*Most* of the time.

A dark brown nezumi appeared on the nearby porch, long tail trailing behind him. He glared at his neighbor, hissing violently. "You share too much with this stranger, Mud-Tail."

The elder nezumi snapped her jaws in response. "Go inside and mind your own business, before one of these mushrooms takes a detour through your house."

The neighbor snarled slightly, hackles raising at the back of his neck, but he took a step back in submission.

"I'm looking for someone called Nashi." Kaito glanced between them. "He used to live a few miles from here when he was a child."

At the sound of his name, several kami poked their heads out from beneath the neighbor's porch. Kami that unmistakably belonged to the swamp, with their collection of floating toadstools and poisonous flowers spinning around their heads. One in particular stared up at Kaito with six enormous frog-like eyes. Four bubbles circled around him, with tadpoles wiggling anxiously inside.

The nezumi may have been experienced with lying, but the kami were not.

Beneath the porch, they began to whisper to one another. Mud-Tail cut them a sharp look, and they retreated into the shadows.

She shrugged at Kaito. “Never heard of ‘em.”

Kaito glanced at the roof. The straw was thinning and frayed near the corners. “Looks like you’ve lived here a long time. Long enough to remember the fire.”

Her tail lifted behind her, swaying hypnotically. “The humans didn’t help us then. Why would we ever help you now?”

“Maybe because of my good looks and charming personality?” When the nezumi didn’t react, Kaito lifted his shoulders. “Look—I only want to talk to him.”

Mud-Tail leaned the wooden handle against the gate and moved for the house. “I don’t think that’s really your choice.” The nezumi was nearly to her front door when she snapped, “Take your questions back to wherever it is you came from. We don’t want you here.”

It was the politest dismissal he’d had all day.

When she vanished inside, Kaito glanced at the stranger still on the porch. His eyes were darker—more onyx than ruby.

“I know the nezumi hid him. I know you want to protect him.” Kaito’s fingers were restless, dancing at his sides. “But what he knows… It could help *all* of us on Kamigawa.”



“I’ve never bitten a human before. We stopped attacking with our teeth in an effort to appear more civilized to you humans. We thought it might change things—show you we were equals, not animals.” He flashed a sneer. A warning. “But some of us are tired of pretending to be something we’re not.”

It would only take Kaito half a second to pull his sword from his back. Not to mention he could pellet the nezumi with poisonous mushrooms merely by flicking his fingers.

It would’ve been the most fun he’d had all week. But it wouldn’t get him information. For that, Kaito needed to play nice.

Or at least pretend to.

He took a step back. “Thanks for your time.” Kaito turned from the village, feeling the eyes of a dozen nezumi on his back.

The glowing road appeared ahead, and Kaito reached for his mask, letting the metal shift into a small tanuki. He didn’t stop walking, even when Himoto, the drone, launched from his hand and disappeared through the nearby trees, back in the direction of the village.

Kaito walked until he was certain he couldn’t be seen.

Ducking behind a willow tree, he kept his distance from every unfamiliar plant, and pressed a finger to his temple. Using his drone’s camera, he

flew across the bog and entered the village from the side. The drone took cover in the wilted plants, sights locked onto the Kami of the Wetland that was plodging clumsily toward another hut, bubbles floating around it with urgency.

The drone chased after it, careful to stay out of sight, and followed the roof toward a smokeless chimney before diving for the hearth.

Kaito listened to the croak of the kami as it shuffled into the living room, relaying a barely audible message to whoever was inside.

"I know," a raspy voice retorted. "Our village isn't the first he's visited—and the more he speaks Nashi's name, the more danger he puts him in."

The kami croaked again. This time, Kaito caught a word.

*Otawara.*

"Yes. I'll warn her. But there's no point sending a drone before nightfall—he'd be able to track it too easily in the daylight," the figure said in a hushed voice. "For now, we just need to make sure our silence is all we give the human."

The tanuki drone lifted back up the chimney, settled behind the stones, and waited.



By the time Kaito reached the edge of the swamp, the sun had set. With the feed from the drone still live, he watched as the nezumi's drone folded itself into the shape of a rabbit, and set off into the darkness.

The tanuki followed, and Kaito headed in the direction of Otawara.

...

It was nearly dawn when Kaito reached the city in the sky. The nezumi's drone had vanished in one of the crowded neighborhoods, but it didn't matter. Kaito would search the streets by foot.

After reuniting with his tanuki mask, he moved across the park, scanning the houses in the distance. It wasn't until he turned into a narrow moss garden that he realized he wasn't alone.

A shadow stretched across the grass. In an instant, Kaito's hand was around the hilt of his sword, and he swung it forward and spun to face the approaching figure.

A moonfolk hovered in front of him. The only emotion on her face was a barely-there flash behind her purple eyes. In her hand was an unrolled scroll, with several more bundled in a satchel at her waist.

Kaito twisted his sword, and the blade's serrated edge appeared briefly before a dozen star-shaped blades broke apart from one another, held in place by his telekinesis.

The woman barely glanced at the weapon. "It is not my wish to hurt you."

"Give it a minute," Kaito said, voice smooth. "You hardly know me."

The stranger glided to the left, moving like a silent breeze. "Your search must end today. Please go home in peace, and do not speak the child's name again."

"Sorry," Kaito replied. "I'm not going anywhere until me and the kid have a conversation."

She dipped her chin. "A conversation does not require so many blades."

"Kind of depends on how willing the person is to talk, doesn't it?"

Her jaw tensed. Clearly Kaito hit a nerve.

He had no intention of harming the nezumi child, but he also wasn't in the mood to explain himself to a stranger—*or* take orders from one.

"If there is information you need, I am certain you can find it elsewhere," she said, voice even. "But you will stay away from my family."

"Sounds like there's a threat laced in there somewhere," he noted, fist tightening. He'd never seen scrolls like hers before, but if they were magic, he wasn't about to take any chances.



Her feet hovered several inches above the moss. "Violence is not my intention."

Kaito cracked a lethal smirk. "You snuck up behind me with an ultimatum and a floating scroll—so forgive me if I don't believe you." He flicked the handle of his blade, and each star shot toward the woman's unrolled parchment.

She spun, swift and graceful, and opened her palm at her side so that the scroll floated beside her.

The throwing stars arced through the sky before returning to Kaito, glinting beneath the sun. With a grunt, Kaito charged toward the slender moonfolk, hoping to distract her with hand-to-hand-combat. She skipped back like she was dancing across the air, arms spread like wings as she remained out of Kaito's reach.

Launching himself forward, he swung hard, but the woman was fast. She ducked before twirling to the side, hands raised like it was merely a part of a performance.

Kaito's eyes were locked onto the floating scroll. With a mental nudge, every star went sailing toward the parchment, chasing it in circles as the woman used her own telekinesis to pull it away. Kaito swung his leg around to meet her, but she shot up into the sky. He caught his balance, reaching toward the razor stars still circling around the garden, and sum-

moned them back in line with his sword. He watched as the woman's eyes drifted back to the scroll.

If he only had a moment, he was going to take it.

Kaito commanded the stars to attack once more, aiming not for the woman or the scrolls, but for the rope attached to her waist. Only one of them found their target, but it was enough. The rope snapped, and the satchel began to slip toward the ground.

Sweeping an arm beside her, she caught the rope before the scrolls fell, but the distraction left her first scroll unguarded. Kaito reached out a hand, and it sailed through the air and into his fist.

The woman blinked, and a second roll of parchment drifted into the air and unravelled in front of her.

The moment she read the words, Kaito felt his entire body stiffen. His sword fell from his hand, and the rogue blades followed, clattering into the moss like broken toys. The scroll floated upward, and by the time the stranger's feet touched the ground, it had returned to the satchel with all the others.

Kaito couldn't move. His bones felt like iron, heavy and unbending. Straining against the magic, he gritted his teeth. "I'm not… trying to hurt… the kid."



She tilted her head curiously, and when she spoke, her ethereal voice sounded only in Kaito's mind. *You are telling the truth, and for that I have only gratitude. But my son is not to be found. By anyone.*

"Your—your son?" Kaito tried to turn his head when the woman moved beside him, but he remained still as stone. Only his eyes could trail her.

She nodded curtly, before plucking one of the scrolls from her case and unrolling it.

"What are you going to do to me?" Kaito asked, cheeks going hot. He was still thinking fast, hoping for a way out of this.

"You needn't be afraid of a simple memory spell." With her mind, she added, *Sending you on a different path will keep you and my family safe. Do not worry—you won't remember any of this.*

Kaito's stomach felt hollow. After all he'd done to get here… To find the Emperor and bring her home…

He couldn't let it all be for nothing. She couldn't take his *memories*.

His words were fuelled by reckless anger. "I'm trying to save the Emperor, and your son may be the only person in Kamigawa who can help!"

The woman floated in front of him, mouth turning into a flat line. "You are mistaken. Nashi knows nothing of the Emperor."

"But he knows about Tezzeret," Kaito said, still fighting against the paralysis spell.

There was hardly any color to her face already, but in that moment she appeared ashen. Her eyes studied Kaito—searching for a sliver of falsehood—but found none.

She hovered with the truth for a stretch of time before gently tucking the scroll away. At once, movement shuddered back through Kaito's body, and he collapsed to his knees.

With a groan, he grabbed his fallen sword and stood, muscles aching. After summoning every blade from the moss, he sheathed the reformed sword at his back, and turned to face the moonfolk.

"So," Kaito said, still panting slightly. "Are you going to tell me how you know about Tezzeret, or are we going to have to fight again?"

"Your arrogance is part of why you lost the battle." She waved a slender hand. "It makes you unfocused."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean, most people call me Kaito, but 'unfocused' works too." Eiko and Light-Paws would almost certainly agree.

There was a faint hint of amusement in her stare. "I am Tamiyo," she said, voice as unwavering as steel. "And perhaps you and I are meant to be allies."



...

Kaito soaked in the details of the room. Watercolor paintings were dotted around the space. Landscapes that might seem fantastical to the people of Kamigawa.

But Kaito recognized them. They were real places. Other *planes.*

He turned back to Tamiyo, who filled two cups with green tea before setting the porcelain pot carefully on a low table.

Kaito blinked. "You're a Planeswalker." It wasn't a question.

Tamiyo sat in the opposite chair and lifted the cup to her lips, blowing gently at the steam. "I believe only a fellow Planeswalker could make that discovery simply by looking at a few amateur paintings."

Kaito knew there were other Planeswalkers in the Multiverse. But he had no idea there was another on Kamigawa. His gaze landed on the leather-bound books and bundles of scrolls scattered across most of the surfaces.

Understanding dawned on him. "You're gathering information." He frowned. "Why?"

Tamiyo sipped her tea. "I believe it is my duty to preserve the truths of the Multiverse." Lifting her brow, she added, "Knowledge helps us grow—as individuals and as a society. It is a gift I do not take for granted."

Kaito held his cup between his palms, letting the warmth move through him. “Tell me about Tezzeret. Who is he? What does he want?”

Tamiyo started to reply when her demeanor shifted abruptly. Her eyes landed somewhere behind Kaito, and her face softened into a smile. “I believe you know of my son, Nashi.”

Kaito turned to find the young nezumi standing in the doorway. With bright white fur and grey spots, he wore a black leather jacket with sharp cuts, and silver rings along the edge of his ear.



*“Nashi, Moon Sage’s Scion”, by Valera Lutfullina.*



Nashi took one glance at Kaito before his face lit up. “Cool mask! Is that a drone?” He held up a piece of hardware that flickered with pixels. “I’ve been trying to build one myself with recycled parts. You know—make something old new again, and all that. Did you build yours? What kind of chip did you use to link your camera? Do you use micro implants, or—” Nashi froze for a moment before grinning sheepishly. “Sorry. That’s probably too many questions at once.”

Kaito pulled his mask from his head, letting her fold again and again until she looked like an origami tanuki.

“Woah,” Nashi said, beaming. “Nice.”

Tamiyo lifted her chin, eyes full of gentle humor. “Did you need something, Nashi?”

He held up the metal. “I need an old data chip. I fried mine trying to connect a piece of broken hardware. Can I go to the secondhand market?”

“Take Rumiyo and Hiroku with you. And try to refrain from filling up on dumplings and coconut buns before dinner.” Tamiyo smiled at her son, but her thoughts were very much inside Kaito’s head. *Don’t ask him about Tezzeret. Most of what I know was kept a secret from him, to protect his heart. I do not wish to remind him of a darkness he’s tried so hard to escape.*

Kaito gave a barely-there nod, and grinned at Nashi. “Good luck with the drone.”

Nashi flashed a toothy grin and hurried back out of the room.

When his footsteps faded and he was out of earshot, Kaito set his cup down and stared at Tamiyo. “Tell me everything.”

So she did.

Kaito learned that Tezzeret wasn’t just a Planeswalker—he was the Planeswalker with the metal arm. The man Kaito saw in Kyodai’s chamber all those years ago.

The man who had something to do with the Emperor’s disappearance.

Kaito’s eyes stung with salt. He felt an ache in his chest—a mixture of grief and clarity that was too overwhelming to carry in such a short moment. But he listened anyway, even as his head swayed and he felt the world tilting.

Tamiyo explained that Tezzeret had come to Kamigawa to acquire magical artifacts from the swamp near Nashi’s village. But when the nezumi refused to sell their land, Tezzeret retaliated. Things escalated quickly, and the entire village burned as a result.



Kaito blinked slowly like he was gathering his thoughts from a far-off place. “But what was he doing with Kyodai? What does he *want*?”

“I believe he is researching kami. I do not know what his true intentions are, but I am determined to find out.” Tamiyo’s voice sharpened. “It is not my wish to intervene in the matters of other planes. But Tezzeret has brought his experiments here, to my home. My family is everything to me, and far more important than my desire for neutrality.”

Kaito stilled. “You’re going to try and stop him?”

“Not until I have learned all there is to know about his research.”

“Threatening kami and kidnapping the Emperor wasn’t enough?” Kaito shook his head, cheeks flushed as his emotions began to take over. “I don’t need to understand him—I want to know where he took my friend.”

Tamiyo glanced away momentarily, and Kaito sensed the unease in her eyes.

There was a desperate rasp in his voice. “What haven’t you told me?”

Her gaze drifted back to him like a tumbling wave. “There is a Planeswalker called the Wanderer, who I met once on Ravnica. She told me about Tezzeret, and the weapon he was prototyping.”

Kaito frowned. “What kind of weapon?”

"It is called a Reality Chip, and it may be dangerous not just to Kamigawa, but to multiple planes. The night the Emperor went missing, Tezzeret had gone to the palace to try and control Kyodai using a prototype of the chip." Tamiyo blinked solemnly. "It did not work. Not in the way Tezzeret had intended. Instead, the chip set off the Wanderer's spark."

Kaito's heart battered against his ribs. When he spoke, he could hardly hear his voice over the ringing in his ears. "What are you saying?"

Tamiyo exhaled. "The Wanderer and the Emperor are one and the same."

*The Emperor.* She was still alive, just like Kaito had always believed.

Hearing the truth made his chest quake with relief.

"A Planeswalker. All this time." He swallowed the knot in his throat. "Why didn't she come home?"

"She is unable to do so," Tamiyo explained. "The Reality Chip left her spark unstable. The Wanderer does not control her gift the way you and I can."

Kaito tightened his fists. "If the prototype of the Reality Chip sent her away, maybe it does the opposite, too. We find Tezzeret, steal the chip, and bring the Emperor home."

"I agree that we need to try. But we must work together on this. Tezzeret does not expect us—we may only get one chance." Tamiyo stilled.



"There is more going on at the labs than either of us knows. Whoever Tezzeret is involved with is after something bigger than just the Wanderer. This is not about ruling Kamigawa—he must want control of the kami for a reason, and I intend to find out what that is. *Before* we chase him underground by going after the Reality Chip unprepared."

"The Emperor needs us," Kaito argued. He wouldn't let her down. Not again.

"We must be patient," Tamiyo insisted.

Kaito stood suddenly, pulse quickening. "I've waited ten years."

"All of Kamigawa has awaited the Emperor's return."

"Not like I have. She—" Kaito couldn't find the words.

But Tamiyo understood even without them. *She was your friend,* her mind said. *I understand the loss you've felt, and the hope you're desperate to replace it with. But we are not ready for this fight. Not yet.*

Kaito set his jaw, pulled his mask over his face, and moved for the door. "Thank you for the tea," he called over his shoulder, "but I have somewhere else to be."

If the Reality Chip would bring his friend back, then he was going after it.

And he wasn't about to wait for Tamiyo's permission.

...

Kaito stood outside Tameshi's lab, staring at the solid doors and the glowing panel on the wall. In his hand was Tameshi's key card—the one Kaito had taken from his friend's pocket just before the warehouse went up in flames.

He'd never wanted Tameshi to die. But if his death led to bringing the Emperor home…

Kaito twisted his mouth stubbornly. He didn't want to think about the trade-off. If Tameshi had come to him, maybe there'd have been another way. A different ending to their journey, that involved them working *together*.

He'd trusted Tameshi with his life. But Tameshi's trust came with secrets. Secrets that got him killed.

The ache it left in Kaito's heart would last an eternity.

He swiped the key card over the panel, and a green light flashed. The door slid open, and when Kaito stepped inside, he mouthed a word of gratitude to the friend he'd never see again.

It was the closest thing to redemption Tameshi might ever get.

Kaito had already worked his magic on the cameras, but he kept his footsteps silent, moving along the shadows of the room like he was a shadow himself. He slipped past enormous glass cylinders that bubbled



with pink liquid. He didn't know what had been kept inside, but he knew a cage when he saw one.

Checking for movement, he crept toward the glass window ahead and peered inside. The room was full of tables covered in the same glass tubes he'd seen at the docks, but there were far more of them than Kaito could easily count. It wasn't just an overnight experiment—this was an entire operation.

But even with the abundance of neon-hued liquids and metal equipment splayed out on the tables, it was the shapes on the floor that Kaito couldn't look away from.

Bodies. *Kami* bodies.

There were dozens of them—alive, but shrivelled and dull, as if their very essence was being sucked out of them. Kaito felt his heart splinter. He'd heard the screams the night on the docks, and he'd done nothing to stop it. The kami had been inside, stolen like cargo, and brought to Tameshi's lab to become test subjects.

The kami hadn't been Kaito's mission. But looking at them now, he felt a horrible guilt surge through his body.

If Eiko were here—if she knew Kaito had heard the screams and done nothing—would she blame him?

He pushed away from the window to search the next room, only to find another unconscious kami. Its body was shaped like a paper lantern, with four small candles scattered around it, confined to a metal surgical bed. There was a haunting grayness to its face, and its candle wicks looked cold to the touch.

But the object behind the kami caught his attention.

Sitting beside an enormous machine was a piece of metal, thin and square and no bigger than Kaito's palm, with wires dangling from the edges like a jellyfish.

Kaito had seen it before, when he'd searched Tameshi's office. The blueprint had been on an encrypted data drive. Back then, he didn't know what it was, or what it could do.

But as he watched the way the light pulsed around it, following the trail of wires that connected the machine to the kami's body, Kaito knew exactly what it was.

The Reality Chip.

Kaito slipped through the door, eyes fixed on the chip as he moved passed the comatose kami. There was nobody guarding the machine. No casing to hide it from prying fingers.

It was just there, waiting.



So Kaito reached out, grabbed the Reality Chip from its stand, and shoved it in his pocket.

*See, Tamiyo?* Kaito thought smugly. *Patience is overrated.*

He left the room, pulling the door shut behind him, and hurried for the exit. But when he turned the final corner, a looming shadow forced him to halt in his tracks. Kaito's sword was in his hand before his eyes had even registered the monster blocking his path.



*"Jin-Gitaxias, Progress Tyrant", by Chase Stone.*

The monster who murdered Tameshi.

Kaito clenched his teeth, eyes blazing with anger.

"Your fleshling eyes suggest familiarity, but knowledge of our meeting evades my memory. The existence of a second Jin-Gitaxias in this world is highly improbable, therefore your recognition must be accepted as genuine." The monster tilted his head, artificial light glinting off of his metal spine. "Schematics are unimportant in this instance. Theft is an offense that will require swift retribution."

Kaito ignored the weight of the Reality Chip in his pocket, focused only on the monster. "Yeah, well, consider this retribution for what you did to Tameshi."

Jin-Gitaxias let out a guttural, metallic sound. "Your goals derive from revenge, but are subjected to misguided assumptions—your fleshling companion was a willing participant, even at his demise. But his inquiries made him inefficient. The work must be protected."

Half a dozen armed ninjas appeared at the monster's sides. Hired henchmen from the Undercity were notorious for doing anyone's dirty work, as long as they were paid.

Kaito pulled his sword back. "Good thing I've never been one for small talk."



The first ninja charged forward, and Kaito struck his weapon against the masked figure's blade with an unyielding blow. For all their confidence, the stranger wasn't prepared, shuddering under the weight of the blade. Kaito pushed hard, forcing them to the ground, when the next figure attacked.

Kaito didn't waste time—he swung for the approaching assailant, who caught the blade with two double-pronged daggers. Throwing his foot back, Kaito braced himself before flicking the handle of his sword. The blade broke into throwing stars, and Kaito rolled to the right just as the figure fell forward in surprise.

The stars sliced through the stranger's armor, making him cry out before his body fell limp to the ground. He didn't rise.

Kaito felt the air shift as the henchmen closed in. They were angry—but so was Kaito.

Calling the stars back to his hilt, they hovered in line like a blade that had been stretched too far. When the next two ninjas approached, Kaito swiped his sword downward, sending the intermittent stars snapping through the air like a whip, catching one of the henchmen in the face.

The other swung a dagger at Kaito. He ducked, legs tensed, and summoned his blades back in place to reform his sword. He swung upward,

against the ninja's dagger, just as two more Undercity ninjas charged. A violent clash of metal sounded, and Kaito blocked again and again.

He faintly registered Jin-Gitaxias up ahead, pacing with the kind of calm that suggested he believed the fight was nearly over. That he'd won.

But he didn't know Kaito. This wasn't about revenge—it was about fulfilling a promise that was ten years in the making.

Tonight, he would not fail.

Kaito became a whirlwind of metal and precision, staving off each attacker with the kind of focus that would've made Light-Paws proud. But there were too many of them, and Kaito's energy would not last forever. So he fought them off, forcing them back, and pulled a small metal device from his belt shaped like an acorn. He threw it against the floor with a ferocious *crack*.

Black smoke exploded through the crowd, and Kaito darted outside of its range just before the electricity snapped through the cloud. The henchmen cried out in confusion at first—and then pain.

Kaito raced for the lab doors without looking back.

He ran from the compound, cold air catching in his throat. He didn't know where he was running; only that he had to get away as fast as possible. Streetlights followed the glowing road, but Kaito leapt over a low





*"Reality Heist", by Mila Pesic.*

wall and took a path through the buildings instead. Jin-Gitaxias was almost certainly aware Kaito had fled with the Reality Chip by now. If they weren't on his tail, they would be soon.

Feet pounding against the concrete, Kaito skidded to a halt near one of the fenced in platforms. It was dark, but he could see the drop toward the clouds below.

Kaito turned, searching for a hiding place, when he saw the hired henchmen approaching, scaling the rooftops across the stretch of walkway. Above them, an enormous mech appeared, metal folding over itself until it settled into the shape of a dragon. It leapt over the nearest building, landing a stretch away from Kaito, and let out a mighty roar.

Magic filled its core, glowing blue from within. Charging for an attack that would be nearly impossible to escape.

Kaito considered planeswalking. It would get him to safety, away from the mech and Jin-Gitaxias's henchmen.

But the Reality Chip was still in his pocket.

What would happen if he planeswalked with it? Would it affect him the way it affected the Emperor?

Would he be able to find his way back to Kamigawa, and finish what he started?

Leaving right now was too great a risk.

He dug his heels into the ground, balled his fists, and prepared to do whatever was necessary to fight his way out of this.

The mech approached, opening its wide jaws to reveal an orb of crackling energy, when Kaito felt the Reality Chip moving in his pocket. Brows



pinched, Kaito pulled it out and stared in horror as the wires writhed against the night air, thrumming with life.

And then the dragon howled.

When Kaito looked back up, the light in the mech's jaws had faded, and a glowing orange streak was sliced all the way across its armored throat. For a moment, the mech remained perfectly still—and then both pieces slipped away from one another and collided with the earth, no longer a threat to anyone.

Standing behind the broken machine was a woman with snow-white hair and a sword in her hand. She lifted her face, features appearing beneath her wide hat, and Kaito recognized her brown eyes immediately.

The last time he'd seen the Emperor of Kamigawa, she was still a child. But the years had changed her. The depth in her gaze seemed to carry the wisdom of a hundred lifetimes. She wasn't just older; she was a warrior. A Planeswalker.

*The Wanderer.*

Kaito pressed a hand to his chest like he couldn't hold back the emotions. The *relief*.

His friend had finally come home.



*"The Wandering Emperor", by William Arnold.*



The Emperor stalked toward him, paying no attention to the figures scaling the rooftops. She was looking only at Kaito.

The flutter of movement sounded nearby, and Kaito broke their gaze to find Tamiyo floating in the night sky, mouth pursed with mild disapproval.

"This is not at all what I meant when I suggested we come up with a plan." Tamiyo unfolded the scroll in her hand, acknowledging the Emperor with only a brief nod.

The moment Tamiyo's eyes finished passing over the scroll, the shadows above the buildings stopped moving. Jin-Gitaxias's henchmen were no longer running; they were searching the ground for something they couldn't see.

"We should not linger," Tamiyo said in a low voice. "There are far better places to have a reunion, and the invisibility spell won't last forever."

Cloaked beneath Tamiyo's magic, the three Planeswalkers fled from Otawara in silence.

# EPISODE IV
# The Break-In

THE EMPEROR HAS RETURNED,
BUT KAMIGAWA IS ON THE BRINK OF WAR.
KAITO AND TAMIYO UNCOVER
AN EVEN DARKER PLAN FROM ANOTHER PLANE.

The Emperor stood across from Kaito, the amber glow of the nearby lanterns silhouetting her slender frame and her face half-hidden in the shadows of her wide hat.

Ten years ago, Kaito had sworn never to step foot in the palace until the Emperor returned. And now she was here—a Planeswalker, just like him—surrounded by the walls of the Imperial Palace.

Kaito felt no nostalgia for Eiganjo. Standing in the Emperor's sakura garden felt like standing in a dream that didn't belong to him. Like he was a piece in the wrong puzzle.

There was an emptiness in the Emperor's eyes that suggested she felt it too—the displacement.

Tamiyo rolled up her scroll and slipped it carefully into her satchel, severing the invisibility spell that had been cloaking them for hours. “I still think we should’ve alerted the guards to your arrival at the gate.” She shook her head with the kind of silken grace Kaito had never mastered. “We cannot keep your return a secret forever.”

“I don’t need forever,” the Emperor replied quietly, white hair shifting in the early morning breeze. “I only need a few moments.” She turned for the porch, slid open the door to Kyodai’s temple, and disappeared inside.

Kaito tried not to react to the knot building in his throat. He had dreamt of their reunion for nearly a decade, but the Emperor had barely looked at him since she stopped the mech on Otawara.

Maybe time had made them strangers.

She was the Emperor of Kamigawa; a childhood friendship was probably the least of her concerns.

“It must be overwhelming to come back here after so many years,” Tamiyo’s voice drifted like a lullaby. *Not just for the Emperor,* she added without words, *but for you, too.*

Kaito flattened his mouth. “Is that a lucky guess, or are you reading my mind?”



“I cannot hear thoughts in all their complexities. But I sense the truth behind your eyes.” Tamiyo motioned toward the surrounding garden. “You have been here before. Many times, perhaps.”

Kaito gritted his teeth as he stared at the nearby flowers. They looked more withered than he’d ever seen them, and there wasn’t a kami to be found.

As a child, the Emperor’s garden was one of Kaito’s favorite places on Kamigawa. But now? It felt void of life, as if it were no more than a forgotten graveyard, or an empty shrine.

Kaito never lost hope that the Emperor would come home, but maybe not every Imperial shared his faith.

“We used to meet here, when we were kids,” Kaito said quietly. “I never felt like I belonged in Eiganjo, but the Emperor…” His voice turned solemn. “She was the reason I stayed for as long as I did.”

Tamiyo nodded. “She was also the reason you left. A path that led you to becoming a Planeswalker.”

Kaito released a tired laugh. “If you’re about to give me a pep talk on fate and things happening for a reason, don’t bother. I believe life is a series of choices.” He shrugged. “If we don’t like our options, we can either beg, fight, or steal to change them.”

Tamiyo's brow twitched, unimpressed. "You have a very grim sense of optimism, Kaito."

Before he could reply, a strange moan sounded from deep inside the temple. Kaito recognized Kyodai's voice—like a shout, a song, and a whisper all at once. Tamiyo's eyes flashed toward the door, mind assessing beyond what Kaito could see, but he didn't wait for her permission. He ran toward Kyodai and the Emperor, feet pounding against the wooden floor the way his heart had pounded ten years ago when we was running down the very same corridor.

It was Tezzeret he found in the room that night. The man with the metal arm that he had hunted for ten years.

Kaito turned the last corner and skidded to a halt. It wasn't Tezzeret who waited for him—it was Kyodai, finally reunited with the Emperor.

The kami's golden body stretched deep into the mist, half hidden in the shallow water. She writhed uncomfortably, even with the Emperor's hand pressed against her lowered face, the black sphere in her forehead duller than Kaito remembered.

Kyodai moaned like she was in pain, and the Emperor flinched, clutching her stomach in response.

Tamiyo floated urgently to her side. "Your spark is still unstable. You cannot remain on Kamigawa without help."



There was a tremor in the Emperor's fingertips. The fight to stay on this plane wasn't an easy one.

"What kind of help does she need?" Kaito strode toward them, arms fixed at his sides. "What can I do?"

Tamiyo's violet gaze was latched onto the Emperor's. They were having a conversation Kaito wasn't a part of.

He didn't care about being left out. He just wanted what was best for his friend.

The Emperor gave a short nod, and Tamiyo looked at Kaito and held out her hand. "The Reality Chip, please."

Kaito pulled the object from his pocket without the slightest hesitation, thrusting it against Tamiyo's palm. "Will it stop her from planeswalking?"

Tamiyo studied the jellyfish-like wires for a moment before taking the Emperor's hand. "I believe this will help to stabilize you for a time, but it is not a permanent solution. Without studying it, I cannot know its full effects—or if any of them would pose a danger to you."

The Emperor's jaw tensed. Above her, Kyodai howled in confusion. "Do what you must."



*"Anchor to Reality", by Alix Branwyn.*

Tamiyo placed the Reality Chip on the back of the Emperor's hand. In an instant, the panel flashed with light, and the wires fused into her flesh like veins pulsing with energy. She let out a sharp yelp, bracing against the pain, until the Reality Chip seemed to settle like a mere extension of her own being.

Kyodai stilled, and for a moment the Emperor looked at peace.



Kaito watched her face crumple once more, and she threw her hands to her temples, squeezing like she was in agony. He whirled toward Tamiyo. "Go and find Light-Paws—she needs to know the Emperor is back. Maybe there's something she can do to help!"

Tamiyo nodded and flew for the door without another word. When the Emperor sunk to her knees, Kaito knelt too, hands pressed to her shoulders like formalities no longer mattered.

Outside of sparring, it would've been forbidden to touch the Emperor like this. But Kaito didn't see the Emperor of Kamigawa—he saw a friend that was in pain.

"What do you need?" His gaze dropped to her hand. "If it's hurting you, I can remove it."

"No," the Emperor said quickly, breaths hitched. "It—it's not that. It's the visions." Her fingers scratched against her skull. "I can see the lab. I can see the *monster*."

*Jin-Gitaxias.* Kaito frowned. He'd found the Reality Chip beside a machine. Was it possible the two were linked somehow?

The Emperor winced, but after a few seconds passed, the pinch in her brow eased, and her face softened. She dropped her hands against Kaito's arms. It was the closest they'd ever been to an embrace.

She looked up, blinking away the confusion. “Kaito?”

“I’m here,” he said, voice cracking. He’d waited ten years to say those words.

The Emperor took a shallow breath. “The monster—he’s informed Risona and the Asari Uprisers of my return. They plan to attack the palace imminently. They’re hoping to catch the Imperials unprepared, before word spreads through Kamigawa that their Emperor has come home.”

Kaito’s mind raced. “If the Uprisers are coming, we have to warn the Imperial samurai. Eiganjo is in danger.”

The Emperor squeezed Kaito’s arms. “We have to stop the monster. He’s been experimenting on kami. Torturing innocents.” She shook her head. “I will not let him cause another war between the mortal and spirit realms.”

“You think that’s what Jin-Gitaxias wants? A war?” Kaito was stoic. The Kami War happened thousands of years ago. The Living Historians and archives may have preserved the stories, but those ancient days were like a myth to most people. Something that was more legend than reality.

Could it really happen again?

Kaito couldn’t understand the logic. Surely there’d be easier ways to cause friction between kami and humans. Jin-Gitaxias could’ve attacked the merge gates, or slaughtered kami in broad daylight.



No. This wasn’t about war—this was about something else. What Jin-Gitaxias was doing to the kami was never meant to be discovered. He did it in secrecy, and even murdered Tameshi to keep him from asking too many questions.

“Whatever Jin-Gitaxias is up to involves Tezzeret.” Kaito looked up at Kyodai, who was still swaying high above him. He’d never realized how truly terrifying the kami was until he could see the hundreds of golden limbs twitching beneath her body. “The night you vanished, Tezzeret used a prototype of the Reality Chip on Kyodai. I think he’s trying to find a way to control the kami.”

“I don’t care what he wants,” the Emperor said. “But I will stop him before he endangers my people.”

Kaito’s eyes darted between hers, when he suddenly realized how long he’d been staring, searching her face for his old friend. He started to pull away, but the Emperor tightened her grip around his arms.

“You were looking for me,” she said quietly. “Even after all this time.”

He blinked, face flushing. “How did you know?”

“I have traveled to many planes over the years. A Kamigawan Planeswalker searching for his missing Emperor is not a story people easily forget.” She

offered a weak smile. “Sometimes I was only a step behind you. If I’d been able to control my spark, our reunion might’ve happened much sooner.”

Kaito felt the ache in his chest again. All this time he’d been searching for her; it never occurred to him she might be searching for him, too.

“I’m sorry it took so long to bring you home,” Kaito said.

“I couldn’t have expected anything else,” the Emperor replied. “You were always late to everything—even our sparring lessons.”

“What? That’s not—” Kaito stopped himself, hearing the laughter hidden at the edges of her voice. He sighed. “I was late *once*.”

The Emperor smiled, eyes brightening like a timid sunrise. Like it had been a long time since she’d felt truly content.

They may have both changed over the years, but in that moment, Kaito felt like they hadn’t really changed at all. They were two friends in the Imperial Palace, talking to each other like all the rules of the world didn’t matter.

And this time there wasn’t even a silk screen between them.

Kyodai sang overhead, body retreating into the mist.

“She’s still confused,” the Emperor admitted. “It’s because of our bond—the uncertainty of my spark affects her a great deal.”



“Is there any way to fix it?” Kaito asked, but the Emperor didn’t reply. She simply stared after Kyodai, watching as the kami disappeared into the vast length of the room.

A rustle of footsteps sounded outside, and the temple doors burst open. Standing in the archway was Light-Paws and Eiko, with Tamiyo floating closely behind them.

Light-Paws’ mouth was parted in shock, her dark eyes moving from the Emperor to Kaito and back again. Kaito immediately dropped his hands from the Emperor’s shoulders, and they both rose to their feet.

The Emperor lifted her chin with unwavering grace and said, “It is good to see you, Light-Paws. Thank you for helping to take care of Kamigawa in my absence. I am grateful for all the court has done.”

Light-Paws didn’t just stumble into a bow—she practically collapsed into it. Eiko bent at the waist, face ashen under the bright lights.

The Emperor twisted her mouth. “Please—we have little time for formalities. Risona and the Asari Uprisers are on their way to Eiganjo as we speak. We must prepare our forces at once.”

Light-Paws rose, nose twitching with confusion. “How do you know this?”



*"Risona, Asari Commander", by Ekaterina Burmak.*

Eyeing Kaito briefly, the Emperor lifted her hand with the embedded Reality Chip. "It seems this device is still connected to the compound it was stolen from."

Tamiyo pressed her feet to the ground. "You've had a vision of the present?"

The Emperor nodded. "The monster has alerted the Uprisers of my return. They want to attack while they believe they have the upper hand."



"I don't understand what Jin-Gitaxias has to gain by attacking Eiganjo." Kaito lifted his shoulders. "He wants test subjects, not a throne."

"Maybe he's using war as a distraction." The Emperor's eyes turned glassy. "Perhaps he wants Kyodai. Or perhaps he just wants what was stolen from him." She glanced at the Reality Chip. If it made her nervous, she hid it well. "Either way, a battle is coming, and we need to be ready to fight."

"The Reality Chip is dangerous even in the most noble of hands." Tamiyo held out her arms, emphasizing the warning in her voice. "The best thing we could do for Kamigawa is destroy it while we still have the chance."

"Absolutely not," Kaito argued, blood rushing to his face. "That chip is the only thing keeping the Emperor from planeswalking. Without it, she could be lost for another decade—maybe even longer." He shook his head stubbornly. "We have to find an alternative."

The Emperor studied the device like she was mulling over her thoughts. "I do not wish to wander the Multiverse with no way of returning home. But if it's a matter of protecting Kamigawa…"

"Kamigawa needs an Emperor," Light-Paws interjected. "You are what's best for your people."

Beside him, Eiko folded her hands and nodded. “We have been preparing for a rebellion for many years. The Imperial samurai are ready—we will protect you and Kyodai.”

Kaito looked at Tamiyo seriously. “There has to be another way to stop Jin-Gitaxias.”

“I do not know a way for the Reality Chip to exist without posing a threat, but perhaps the more immediate danger is the research we left behind.” Tamiyo pursed her lips, thoughtful. “If we destroy the lab, we destroy everything they’ve been working toward—and perhaps destroying the link to the Reality Chip will give the Emperor more control.”

The mixture of unease and hope in the room was palpable.

“I’ll do it,” Kaito insisted. “I’ll destroy Tameshi’s compound.” His eyes moved past Light-Paws, ignoring the pinch in his chest as he did, and looked at his sister instead. “All I need are a few detonators from the Imperial vault. I’ll get the charges into the lab, and set them off from the outside.”

Eiko pulled her face back with disapproval. “Those weapons were confiscated, Kaito. They are not regulation approved. You shouldn’t even *know* about them.”

Kaito raised a brow, taunting. “Why keep them locked away if you were never going to use them?”



“They’re looked after until they can be disposed of safely,” Eiko corrected tersely.

Kaito held out his palms. “That’s exactly what I’m suggesting! I’m going dispose of the detonators safely. Inside Tameshi’s compound. Preferably next to the Reality Chip’s machine.”

Eiko scowled. “Blowing up a building is *not*—”

“Kaito is right,” the Emperor interrupted, making Eiko—and Light-Paws—stiffen. “We must destroy the compound, and all the research inside it.” She turned to Light-Paws. “We are dealing with an enemy from another plane, and a danger to Kamigawa we have never witnessed before. Using unapproved weapons may not be ideal, but it is our best solution. And it will allow every Imperial to remain in Eiganjo where they are needed most.”

Eiko and Light-Paws lowered their heads in acceptance.

“You’ll need help,” Tamiyo said to Kaito, fingers shifting delicately at her sides. “They sent a mech after you last time. Who knows how many henchmen are still searching for you on Otawara.”

Kaito quirked a brow. “You volunteering?”

“I believe two Planeswalkers are better than one,” Tamiyo replied matter-of-factly.

"I will join you both." The Emperor shifted in place. "My visions from inside the compound could prove useful. And there are kami that still need to be set free."

"With respect, Emperor, but you are needed here," Light-Paws said, flattening her ears. "Your people will be looking to you for guidance."

"They can look to the court for guidance, as they have throughout my long absence," the Emperor replied. Her words had no malice or spite—she was merely stating a fact.

But Kaito sensed the shift in her voice again. Kamigawa was no longer the home she left. Maybe she was wondering where she fit in it, the way Kaito had for most of his childhood.

Eiko hesitated before speaking. "If the Reality Chip is what this Jin-Gitaxias is looking for, then the safest place for you is surrounded by these walls and the samurai sworn to protect you."

Light-Paws' tails flicked behind her in response. A sign of approval. Kaito knew it well—it was something he never had, while his sister had in abundance.

He'd never been jealous of Eiko over anything except that.



The Emperor stood with her thoughts for several long moments, weighing her options. She was both the Emperor and the Wanderer—but perhaps each role needed to be different. "I will remain here," she said at last.

Light-Paws and Eiko nodded, leaving the temple to alert the guards. Tamiyo moved to follow them, pausing in the doorway at the other end of the room.

Kaito didn't move. He was still trying to read his friend behind her silence.

The Emperor stared into the mist like she was searching for answers.

"Nobody on Kamigawa can protect the Reality Chip better than you can. And no wall is going to make a difference," Kaito said quietly. "But something tells me you already know that."

She met his gaze. "My duties to Kamigawa involve more than simply showing my strength. Sometimes it's more powerful to give my *people* strength."

"By letting them think they have to protect you?"

"Having something to fight for unites people. It has been that way as far back as the Historians have recorded our stories." The Emperor motioned toward Kyodai. "And there is someone else to protect. If it's Kyo-

dai they're after, I will make sure she's safe. But… promise me you will free any captive kami before you set off the charge."

"You have my word," Kaito replied.

Tamiyo looked away, feigning privacy, but her thoughts slipped into Kaito's mind. *We should go now. We have a long journey ahead.*

Kaito gave a curt nod and moved for the door. He looked over his shoulder, watching as the Emperor stepped into the mist where Kyodai was hidden, and made a silent promise that he would find a way to help her, and make it so that she'd never have to disappear again.

…

By the time Kaito and Tamiyo reached Otawara, the sky was streaked in shades of apricot and plum. A sign of the fading sunlight.

The streets were quiet, but not unusually so. There were no hints of Undercity henchmen scaling the rooftops or watching from the alleys. No mechs surveying the ground for Kaito and his friends.

It felt like they weren't being hunted at all.

Kaito couldn't get rid of the knot in his brow. On one hand, it wasn't a surprise Jin-Gitaxias' henchmen weren't swarming the floating city. They



were outsiders, after all, and working outside of what most Futurists stood for. But on the other hand…

*This feels too easy,* Kaito thought to himself.

Tamiyo's face was painted with the same suspicion. *Perhaps our enemies on Otawara have joined forces with the Asari Uprisers and are headed for Eiganjo,* her thoughts suggested.

Kaito didn't envy what the Imperials were about to face. They were some of the best fighters on Kamigawa, trained in the most prestigious and elite academies. But they'd been living in relative peace for over a century. They'd never known war outside of the historical records.

The Uprisers were different. They knew what it was to work hard, and fight to survive. Even the snowy, volcanic climate they grew up in was harsh. They knew what true perseverance felt like—and what they were willing to sacrifice in order to win.

Kaito didn't doubt the Imperials could match them in skill, but in sacrifice?

Would they give up the Reality Chip to keep the Emperor safe? And if the Emperor was taken… would they give up the throne to get her back?

*Light-Paws would never allow it,* Kaito's mind hummed. She always said a throne was more than a chair—it was a position. And if you gave up a throne, you gave up the symbol that held Kamigawa together.

Kaito never had much faith in the Imperials, but the Emperor had Light-Paws and Eiko on her side—and Kaito had faith in them.

Moving quickly toward Tameshi's compound, Kaito and Tamiyo slipped inside without being seen and raced for the lab. There was still evidence of Kaito's earlier visit. His device was still interfering with the cameras. There were scuff marks on the floor, no doubt from the henchmen who'd scrambled to chase after him.

And the lab doors had been left unlocked.

Kaito frowned, hesitating near the panel. Something didn't feel right. It was as if every barrier had been left unguarded. Months of Jin-Gitaxias' experiments were sitting beyond the doors. He'd never leave them so vulnerable. Not unless—

Kaito froze. *Not unless he's already moved them.*

Hissing a curse under his breath, Kaito bolted through the lab doors, ignoring Tamiyo's sharp warning to wait. He didn't see the point in waiting; not when he might already be too late.



When he turned the corner for the lab, he saw the equipment through the long glass window, still glowing in neon colors.

But the kami…

Kaito felt their absence before he reached the window. Forehead pressed to the glass, his eyes scanned the empty metal beds, each marked with a sheen of metallic ash. The only evidence of a kami dematerializing.

Guilt gnawed at Kaito's bones, and he shoved from the glass toward the next room where he'd found the Reality Chip. The machine was still there, flickering with life, but the kami that had been attached to it with wires was gone. Murdered by the same people who'd killed Tameshi.



*"Explosive Entry", by Marta Nael.*

Tightening his fists, Kaito turned to Tamiyo. “We’re too late to save them.” Twice he’d seen what was happening to the kami, and he’d turned his back on them for his own reasons. He’d told himself his mission came first—finding the Emperor was all that mattered.

But he’d never meant for them to die like this.

And he’d promised the Emperor…

Tamiyo’s face was blank. Controlled. “It is not your fault, Kaito. You could not have known what would happen.”

He rolled his shoulders back, nodding toward the machine. “We need to destroy it. All of it. So that they can never harm the kami again.”

“It is not the kami we were ever truly after,” a low voice drawled.

Kaito and Tamiyo spun around. Standing several yards away was a man with pink eyes and a metal arm.

Tezzeret.

Kaito’s voice was an earthy growl. *“You.”*

Understanding washed over Tezzeret as he studied Kaito’s face. “The boy from the palace—from the rooftops.” His tone was laced with mockery. “You looked as angry then as you do now.”



Tamiyo took a step forward. “If you’re not after the kami, then why did you kill so many of them?”

“We needed to test the connection between kami and the spirit realm, to study the bond between the material and immaterial aspects of existence—the body and the soul. And kami are much easier to come by than what Phyrexia *really* needs.” Tezzeret flashed his teeth, eyes sparking like wildfire. “I should thank you.”

Kaito scowled. “For what?”

A horrible scrape of metal sounded, and Jin-Gitaxias appeared from the shadows, moving beside Tezzeret like a looming nightmare. Tezzeret didn’t blink, even as Jin-Gitaxias flexed his metal claws and leant forward.

“For allowing the research to flourish by bringing Planeswalkers to our laboratory,” Jin-Gitaxias snapped with an eerie delight.

Kaito stiffened before exchanging a wary glance with Tamiyo.

*It’s us they want,* she pressed into his mind. *The experiments—they’re about Planeswalkers, not kami.*

By the time Kaito’s sword was in his hand, the Undercity henchmen appeared from every corner of the room. They’d been waiting all along, knowing Kaito would come back.

It was a trap—and Kaito and Tamiyo had walked right into it.

Kaito could feel Tamiyo's thoughts pressing against his own, but he ignored them, focusing instead on the serrated edge of his blade. He broke his sword apart with his mind, sending each piece forward in sharp bursts of speed, every star-shape headed for Tezzeret's chest.

But they stilled in the air, inches from the man with the metal arm.

Tezzeret sneered, eyes darkening, and he flicked a hand toward the throwing stars and sent them scattering back toward Kaito and Tamiyo. They pulled back in unison, bracing for an impact that never came.

The blades hovered against their skin, daring them to move.

Tamiyo reached for a scroll, when a strip of metal equipment tore from the ceiling and wrapped itself around her hand like a monstrous restraint. She barely blinked when one of the scrolls began to rise from her satchel, but Tezzeret merely tutted.

"I wouldn't do that. Not if you want your friend to live," Tezzeret warned.

When Tamiyo glanced at Kaito, she saw the two star-blades that had inched their way against his throat. It would take less than a second to puncture his skin.

"Don't hold back on my account," Kaito offered with a ragged breath. "Besides, he needs us. I saw what they did to the kami—hooking them up to those machines for who knows how long. He's not going to let either one of us die before he gets us on those tables."



Jin-Gitaxias' voice clicked like a mechanical insect. "Multiple test subjects would provide more opportunities to expand our knowledge. But if one of the fleshlings threatens productivity, then a single specimen will suffice."

Tezzeret looked down his nose at Kaito. "You're the Planeswalker who has been asking questions about me. The one searching for the Emperor across the Multiverse." He stepped closer, and Kaito felt the metal blades digging through his armor, moments from breaking through. "I have to admit, I imagined someone less… disappointing."

Kaito's throat burned. "Don't worry—I'm just warming up."

Tezzeret shifted, hair falling over his shoulders, but before he had a chance to reply, Kaito flicked his fingers against the air. A dagger hidden in his belt went sailing toward the ceiling, slicing through the wires holding up one of the overhead lights.

Sparks exploded, and the lantern fell from the ceiling toward Tezzeret, who jumped out of the way just as glittering shards of glass burst across the floor. Kaito used the distraction to twist away from the blades, charging for the nearest ninja who'd already raised their sword to attack.

Kaito ducked low, sweeping a leg against the assailant's knees, and swung his elbow back around until it collided with their chin. Bolting for-

ward, he removed one of the smoke devices from his belt, preparing to throw it toward Jin-Gitaxias, when Tamiyo's voice sounded in his thoughts.

*Kaito,* she said. It sounded like a plea.

He looked over his shoulder and saw Tamiyo wrapped in even more metal than before, with a fragment of silver stretched over her eyes. She couldn't read her scrolls, and Kaito would never be able to free her from so many restraints.

If he fought his way out of the compound, he'd have to leave Tamiyo behind.

"Like I said," Tezzeret's raspy voice sounded, hands held out to his sides as every scrap of technology around him seemed to vibrate in response. "We only need one of you."

Kaito couldn't help Tamiyo. But he couldn't leave her behind either.

Not to this fate. Not when he saw what had become of the kami, tortured until their death.

Kaito would stay, and fight, and likely be captured—if he wasn't killed first. But how would that help the Emperor?

He reached for the charge in his pocket. There was still time to destroy the lab, with Jin-Gitaxias and Tezzeret along with it. He could protect Kamigawa. The Emperor and Kyodai would be safe from harm.



Maybe without the Reality Chip tethered to the machine, the Emperor could even find a way to repair her spark.

Kaito's fingers curved around the detonator. People sacrifice everything to war.

But this?

He'd make this sacrifice only for a friend.

In one quick motion, Kaito pulled the device from his pocket and hurled it toward the room with the machine, listening to the whistle as it flew threw the air.



*"Spell Pierce", by Lie Setiawan.*

But the weapon never made impact—it stopped just short of the glass, before slowly floating into Tezzeret's hand.

He let out a dark chuckle. "Your problem," Tezzeret said icily, "is that you depend far too much on the technology I've already mastered." In his palm, the detonator broke apart piece by piece, until it became nothing more than a pile of useless metal and microchips.

Something cracked against the back of Kaito's head, and everything around him faded to black.

…

The Wanderer's eyes flashed open in alarm. Sweat pooled at her brow, and she gasped against the cold air, fingertips digging into the misty temple floor.

Eiko was beside her, face curled with concern. "What is it? What have you seen?"

The Wanderer inhaled sharply, searching the room like she was trying to remember exactly where she was.

It wouldn't have been the first time she'd woken up in an unfamiliar room.

But Kyodai's slow moan was enough to remind her that she was still on Kamigawa. She was still home, however unnatural that might've felt.



The Wanderer clutched her robes as she stood. "Kaito and Tamiyo… they're in trouble."

Eiko's eyes widened, swollen with fear. The Wanderer hadn't known Eiko the way she'd known Kaito, but she still remembered the stories he'd told her of his sister. She knew their bond was strong—maybe even stronger than the bond between kami and channelers.

After what the Wanderer glimpsed inside the compound, Eiko was right to be worried.

Light-Paws stopped pacing at the edge of the mist. "What kind of trouble?"

"They were ambushed by Tezzeret and Jin-Gitaxias." The Wanderer shuddered at the memory. It felt so visceral and real, like she'd been there herself. "If I don't help them, they'll never make it out."

Light-Paws' tails rose behind her like a fan. "Eiganjo needs its Emperor. We have gone too long without a ruler, and it's caused friction among the Imperial court and instability throughout Kamigawa. Not to mention the Asari Uprisers could be at our gates at any moment."

The Wanderer met Light-Paws' gaze. "You have been helping to look after the palace for ten years without me. You can handle another ten minutes."

Light-Paws opened her mouth to argue—to plead for the Wanderer to remain behind—but it was Eiko who interrupted.

"We will protect the palace in your absence," Eiko said, bowing slightly. When she lifted her face, her eyes shimmered with fresh tears. "Please bring him home," she mouthed inaudibly.

For Eiko, her loyalty to the palace had always come first. But she would not risk her brother's life for duty's sake. Not even with Light-Paws watching.

It was an alignment the Wanderer and Eiko shared.

The Wanderer nodded. She turned to face Kyodai in the distance, lifting a hand to beckon her closer.

*My old friend,* the Wanderer sent her thoughts through the mist. *I need your help.*

Kyodai appeared with a lilting cry and lowered her head. *What is it you need from me, Emperor?* To anyone else, Kyodai's voice was a mixture of sounds, layered together like a chorus. But in the Wanderer's head, it was as light and clear as the ring of a bell in an empty room.

*I cannot control my spark. But perhaps with your help—with our bond—I can stabilize it enough to planeswalk into the compound,* the Wanderer explained.

*It will be dangerous,* Kyodai warned. *The monster will do all he can to take the Reality Chip, and you.*



*I am not afraid of the monsters I can see,* the Wanderer replied. *I'd rather face the enemy when it's right in front of me than have it hunt me from the shadows.*

Reaching behind her shoulder blade, the Wanderer drew her sword, gripping it tightly with two hands. She nodded to Kyodai, who hummed above her, swaying absently in the mist.

Energy filled the Wanderer's chest. She could feel the erratic call of her spark—but Kyodai's warmth was there too, calming her. Centering her like a compass pointing in the direction of home.

Even if she wasn't entirely sure where that was anymore, something inside her heart wondered if home didn't have to be a place at all.

Maybe home was with the people she cared about, who cared about her, too.

And Kaito never gave up on the Wanderer. He travelled across planes to find her, and willingly faced a monster to bring her home.

She would not give up on him now.

Leaving Light-Paws, Eiko, and Kyodai in the temple, the Wanderer planeswalked out of Eiganjo and into Tameshi's compound with a flash of light. She did not announce herself. She did not search for Kaito in the room. And she did not hesitate when the eyes of the chrome-like monster turned to meet her.

The Wanderer brought her sword down like a blow from the heavens, and cleaved Jin-Gitaxias from his neck to his chest.

The wound was severe, and the metallic cry that erupted from his throat rattled through her eardrums. The Wanderer fought her way to Kaito and Tamiyo, both of them bound to surgical tables like they were being readied for an experiment. She took one look at the restraints, and cleaved them apart, too.



*"Wanderer's Intervention", by Cristi Balanescu.*



Pulling Kaito toward her with one arm, she watched his eyes flicker back to consciousness.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" he asked groggily, fingers fumbling for a weapon that was no longer there. "Stand back—I got this."

That was the Kaito she remembered—the boy who refused to ever admit he'd lost a fight.

"I think you'll find that I'm the one saving *your* life. Which, by my count, is the second time in less than a day." Her eyes flashed with humor. "There are other ways of getting my attention, you know."

The Wanderer could hear the shuffle of footsteps nearby. They were ready for a fight.

But so was she.

The Emperor of Kamigawa handed Kaito a dagger from her belt and smirked. "I can see all our time apart has left you severely behind on your training, but do *try* to keep up."

# EPISODE V
# Threads of War

TAMIYO, KAITO, AND THE EMPEROR
RETURN TO DEFEND EIGANJO.
BUT WHEN THAT BATTLE ENDS,
A NEW FIGHT FOR THE MULTIVERSE
BEGINS ON THE HORIZON.

The compound was a chaos of metal and blood, but the Wanderer didn't stop moving. She was a part of the dance—a figure in the ever-moving battle.

Nearby, Kaito's sword clashed again and again, fighting the onslaught of Jin-Gitaxias' hired henchmen. Tamiyo hovered in the distance, scroll unbound as she held Tezzeret in a temporary state of paralysis.

Deep claw-marks were streaked across the floor where Jin-Gitaxias' half-severed body lay. A sign that he'd tried—and failed—to stand back up.

Now, he was unmoving.

The Wanderer didn't bother checking to see if there was still life in him. Fighting felt like being in a trance. It consumed every one of her thoughts, and it wouldn't end until the danger passed.

One by one, their enemies fell. The Wanderer and Kaito made sure of it.

When the chaos faded, only the ring of silence filled the Wanderer's ears. She turned, breathing controlled despite the adrenaline coursing through her, and saw a flicker of relief in Kaito's grin.

"We make a good team," he said, twisting the handle of his sword until the jagged edge flattened and the blade was once again smooth. "It's a shame there's no one left for round two."

"I didn't realize you'd developed such a taste for war," the Wanderer replied, straightening her hat. "The boy I remember would've much preferred the spoils of the palace kitchen."

Kaito's laugh was loose. In one smooth motion, he sheathed his sword at his back. "You've been gone a long time if you think palace food is still the best on Kamigawa. I'll introduce you to this vendor in Towashi—they make these smoked crab rolls that practically melt in your mouth and—"

Tamiyo cleared her throat, motioning to a magically-bound Tezzeret. Though his body didn't move, his pink eyes raged with life.



Kaito ran a hand over his shaved head, sheepish. "Right. Business first, food later."

Tamiyo looked at him briefly before focusing her attention on the Wanderer. "It is clear this man poses a threat to Kamigawa, but perhaps it would benefit us all to learn the truth of his plans before we lock him away?"

The Wanderer swept a strand of white hair from her brow. "Whatever his plans, it's the kami he hurt—and perhaps it's the kami he should answer to."

Kaito frowned. "You want to take him to Kyodai?"

Her voice was as unyielding as stone. "Yes. We will decide his fate together."

The Emperor was taught to control her emotions, even in the midst of battle. But she was still a child when her spark sent her to another plane. For a long time, she was all alone. *Grieving* alone.

So she did the only thing she could—she tightened the lock on her heart, and turned her controlled demeanor into a means of survival.

Now that she was home, she could feel her emotions thundering against her chest, longing to be set free. But she wouldn't let her guard down. Not until she knew for sure that she could stay on Kamigawa.

Because if she opened the gates to her heart and allowed herself to feel the joy of seeing her people again—seeing *Kaito* again—only to have it ripped away from her once more?

It might take an entire lifetime to recover from that kind of heartbreak.

The Wanderer stepped toward Tezzeret and sheathed her own sword. Whatever he'd done to Kyodai ten years ago had inadvertently set off the Wanderer's spark. Perhaps that meant he was also the key to reversing whatever damage his prototype chip had done.

She'd get answers from him. But she'd do it with Kyodai at her side.

"We leave for Eiganjo at once," the Wanderer ordered.

Tamiyo gave a slight bow in acknowledgement. Kaito merely nodded.

But Tezzeret watched them with a newfound energy. The veins in his neck strained against Tamiyo's story magic, gaze drifting down to where the Reality Chip was embedded on the back of the Wanderer's hand. He couldn't move his body, but his mind?

Maybe his mind was all he needed.

An icy shudder ran through the Wanderer. There was no time to say anything—no time to shout a warning before Tezzeret took control of the Reality Chip.



The Wanderer screamed, hands shooting to her temples as the device pulsed with energy. The metal wires dug themselves deeper into her flesh, throbbing with power. There was a flash of white, and she felt her mind jump from the compound to the Imperial Palace, where Kyodai wailed in her chamber. It was as if their minds had been united—and the connection meant that Kyodai was in agony, too.

The Wanderer felt like her soul was flickering between the doorway of one world and the next. The Reality Chip was disrupting her spark, forc-



*"Brilliant Restoration", by Wylie Beckert.*

ing her on the verge of planeswalking. But it also sharpened the Wanderer's bond with Kyodai, and through it, the Wanderer could hear Kyodai's thoughts as clearly as if they'd been standing in the same room.

*Eiganjo is under attack,* Kyodai called out. *Risona has brought an army. You must not planeswalk again—the palace needs you.*

The Wanderer tried to respond—to tell Kyodai about Tezzeret and the Reality Chip—but it was no use. Pain radiated through every nerve. Her spark was destabilizing.

The Wanderer's mind fluttered.

"No!" Kaito shouted, voice hoarse. He threw his hand out, reaching for a large crate in the distance, and tugged with his mind. With a desperate growl, Kaito sent the object flying across the room, where it landed with a heavy *crack* against Tezzeret's spine.

He slumped to his knees, dizzy, but Kaito didn't give him time to recover. A second crate crashed into the back of Tezzeret's head, louder and faster than the first.

The impact knocked Tezzeret out cold.

Tamiyo flattened her mouth and re-read the paralysis spell. "His power over technology allows him to manipulate the Reality Chip." Her gaze drifted to the Wanderer. "Whatever he's done—it is making your spark volatile."



Kaito knelt beside the Wanderer, face crumpling with concern. "I thought you said the chip would keep her on Kamigawa?"

Tamiyo floated closer. With an ethereal grace, she leaned down and lifted the Wanderer's hand to get a closer look at the device. "I believe Tezzeret has activated something inside the device. But this technology is beyond my understanding. I do not see a way to undo it."

"I can feel it. It's like I'm splitting apart from inside," the Wanderer said with a pained nod. "Please—help me remove it."

"You will risk planeswalking if I do," Tamiyo noted.

"The chip won't keep me here. Not anymore. And if I planeswalk *with* it, I'll be lost in the Multiverse with an unstable Reality Chip. Who knows what could happen?" The Wanderer clutched her chest, fighting for a way to tether herself to this plane. "The chip opened a path to Kyodai. I can concentrate my energy on her, and use our bond to try and control my spark."

"Will it be enough?" Kaito asked, voice raw with hope.

The Wanderer didn't dare look him in the eyes. She was too afraid he'd see the cracks. "It will have to be," was all she said.

Tamiyo gave a nod of understanding and pressed a finger to the Reality Chip, waiting as the strange wires writhed and shook free of the Wanderer's skin.



*"Tamiyo's Safekeeping", by Aurore Folny.*

The Wanderer bit the edge of her lip, trying not to gasp from the pain. "There's something else," she added, watching the way Tamiyo was studying the chip like it wasn't a weapon at all, but a book in an ancient library. Something that needed time to be understood. "Kyodai said Eiganjo is already under attack. If there's any hope of stopping the Uprisers, we need to get there before Risona reaches Kyodai."

Kaito frowned. "She wouldn't hurt a kami, would she?" And not just any kami—Kyodai was the spirit guardian of all Kamigawa.



The Wanderer's face paled. "Risona wants to abolish the empire and bring an end to Imperial rule. Perhaps she believes taking the throne by force will be enough to destroy it. But if she realizes Kamigawa will never accept a radicalized republic without Kyodai's blessing, she may seek to remove Kyodai altogether. Either way, I must protect the temple."

"It will take us hours to reach Eiganjo." Kaito motioned to a still unconscious Tezzeret. "And unless one of Tamiyo's scrolls happens to be a levitation spell, we're going to have to carry our prisoner all the way there. Who, may I point out, is almost exclusively muscle and metal." He lifted his shoulders. "I'm just saying, this may not be the best time for a back injury."

"I was able to planeswalk from Eiganjo to this compound," the Wanderer said. "I can return to the palace the same way."

"But you'd be alone." Kaito shook his head. "Not to mention you don't have the chip this time. What if it didn't work?"

"Then we need transportation." The Wanderer's voice was levelled. Serious. "Something faster than the sky ferry, with room to carry all four of us."

Kaito twisted his mouth. "There are surveillance mechs all over Otawara. But they're unpilotable. Someone would have to hack into the controls and route a course for Eiganjo manually."

Tamiyo hummed, pensive. “Perhaps there is an alternative. The Reality Chip seems to augment power that is already there, such as the Wanderer’s spark.” She looked at Kaito. “Like you, I am telekinetic.”

Kaito was still kneeling beside the Wanderer, the concern forming a pinch in his brow. “Please tell me you’re not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting.”

Tamiyo lifted the Reality Chip to the back of her own hand and pressed the panel to her flesh. The wires nestled into her skin, making her suck in a quick breath, before the edges of the device began to glow.

She motioned to Tezzeret. “Help me carry him to the nearest mech. I will get us to Eiganjo.”

The group moved quickly, carrying the weight of their enemy on their shoulders. They made their way to the edge of Otawara, where a surveillance mech shaped like an enormous origami reptile was perched on a high platform. Its sights were glued to the sky ferry below.

Kaito tilted his head toward the armored machine, where a pair of projectiles rested on its shoulders. “Anyone else see the problem here?”

“Allow me,” the Wanderer said as if accepting a friendly challenge.

She moved swiftly across the pavement, staying clear of the mech’s cameras. Sword in hand, the Wanderer raised the handle over her shoulder,



blade pointed skyward, and heaved the weapon straight for the metallic beast’s neck—right between two plates of armor at the top of its spine.

The sword struck hard, and sparks flew from its neck like a display of faulty wires. The mech let out a ragged groan before lowering its body to the ground and settling into a state of hibernation.

The Wanderer climbed up its back, using the fan-like armor as steps, and retrieved her sword before twisting to look at the others. “We should hurry—it’s only a matter of time before someone notices the surveillance feed is no longer working. And we don’t exactly have time to be answering questions.”

Kaito and Tamiyo helped to drag Tezzeret’s body onto the mech’s back, doing their best to secure themselves to the array of metal disks layered along the spine.

With Tezzeret wedged beneath one of his arms, Kaito glanced warily at the Wanderer, and then back at Tamiyo. “Right, so do we count to three or—”

Tamiyo didn’t wait for him to finish; she shut her eyes, took a breath, and let the Reality Chip’s power course through her veins.

Beneath them, the reptilian mech shook. The Wanderer threw a hand forward, bracing herself against one of the shoulder blades. It sounded as if the very sky was being ripped in half—and then the mech lifted into the air.

The Wanderer's heart lurched as Tamiyo sent the machine sailing over the edge of Otawara. They flew through the clouds, wind hammering against their faces. Kaito grinned wildly, enjoying every moment, while Tamiyo's brow was furrowed with deep concentration.

The mech shuddered beneath them—it was a great deal of metal to control, and the Wanderer wasn't sure how the Reality Chip could be affecting Tamiyo. The Wanderer used it to help her planeswalk, but that only took a few seconds. It would take significantly more time to reach Eiganjo.

She tightened her grip around Tezzeret, and hoped the breeze would carry them faster.

When they finally broke through the clouds, the Wanderer could hear the faint sound of war in the distance. The clash of metal. The screams of the wounded.

On the surface below, the Wanderer watched as the walls outside the Imperial Palace were turned to rubble.

Risona and the Asari Uprisers had indeed come to Eiganjo—and they'd already breached the gates.

When Tezzeret stirred, the Wanderer wasn't fast enough to draw her sword.



With a ferocious wave of his hand, he yanked every smoke device from Kaito's belt, sending them scattering across the mech's back. They exploded in bursts of white and gray smoke, leaving Kaito, Tamiyo, and the Wanderer coughing violently and straining for clean air. The mech rumbled, teetering from side to side, and the Wanderer felt her hand start to slip.

Kaito reached out, fingers latching desperately around her forearm. "I got you!"

But the Wanderer's eyes were pinned to Tezzeret's glowing pink ones. He sneered before launching himself from the mech. At the same time, Tamiyo let out a strained cry.

She couldn't control the mech alone—and they were seconds away from impact, too close to the surface to avoid smashing into the earth.

The Wanderer looked at Kaito with a desperate urgency. "We need to jump," she ordered.

Kaito didn't want to let go—she could see it in his horrified gaze. But the Wanderer wasn't going to give him a choice.

She yanked her arm from his grip and leapt for the surface.

The last thing the Wanderer saw before twisting her body to soften her own landing was the mech exploding against the side of an Imperial apartment.

...

When the smokey haze finally cleared, Kaito stood, strength returning to his limbs, and searched near the remains of the mech for any sign of the Emperor.

He couldn't find her.

Maybe it was a good thing not to find a body. Maybe it meant she survived the fall.

Moth riders swept overhead before diving into the nearby battlefield. They weren't interested in the wreckage. Not when the war continued to rage on the other side of the wall.

And Tezzeret—where had he gone?

When Tamiyo appeared in the clearing, Kaito stared wide-eyed. "What just happened? I thought he was paralyzed!"

Tamiyo lifted her hand, displaying the flickering Reality Chip that remained there. "Using the chip must've interfered with my magic. I could not maintain the spell and fly the mech at the same time."

Kaito laced his fingers together and rested them against his head. "He's a Planeswalker—he could be anywhere."



"Tezzeret will not leave this plane without the Reality Chip," Tamiyo pointed out. "And he still believes it's in the Emperor's possession."

Kaito's stomach dropped, but the grating sound of metal on metal pulled his attention away. He ran to the other side of the debris, skidding to a halt before he reached the railing, and peered below at the chaos flooding through the Imperial courtyard.

An enormous mech folded itself into the shape of a lion, energy blazing from its outstretched jaws toward the Uprisers charging through the broken wall. Kyodai's temple was still protected, but with the first wall breached and a slew of bodies crowding the gardens, Kaito couldn't say for certain which side was winning.

In the distance, he saw the Emperor. Round hat shielding most of her white hair, she was making her way toward Kyodai's chamber. She moved like a gust of wind, determined and focused, and when Kaito's gaze drifted higher, he saw why.

Risona was there, a few buildings ahead, with several Uprisers scaling the wall beside her. She must've used the battle as a diversion, and slipped past the most heavily guarded areas.

But the Emperor was moving quickly. If her path remained clear, she'd be able to cut Risona off before the Uprisers reached the temple.

*Unless Tezzeret found her first.*

Tamiyo reached the edge of Otawara, slender finger pointing toward the rooftop below. “There.” Her voice was sharp. “He’s going after the Emperor.”

Kaito’s brows knotted as he scanned the black roof tiles. With his black clothes and dark hair, Tezzeret wasn’t easy to find. But when the sunlight glinted off his metal arm, Kaito hissed through his teeth.

“I’ll get us closer,” Tamiyo said. With one step, she wrapped her arms around Kaito, lifted him into the air, and soared toward Eiganjo’s inner wall.

They slammed against one of the roofs with an unpleasant *thud*. Kaito rocked back on his heels to keep from sliding, sending several tiles toppling to the ground.

“I apologize for the rough landing.” Tamiyo stood, regaining her composure. “Flying is much easier as a solo venture.”

Kaito removed his mask. Himoto folded and refolded like metal paper before shifting into her familiar tanuki shape. Launching her forward with one hand, the drone flew down into the chaos below.

“What are you doing?” Tamiyo asked, puzzled.

He blinked, watching the drone vanish in the crowd. “Making sure we have a backup plan.” There was no time to explain—not when the Emperor was in danger.





*“Kaito’s Pursuit”, by Cristi Balanescu.*

Kaito charged across the roof, scaling wall after wall, trying to close the gap between him and his enemy. Tezzeret was too focused on the Emperor to notice Tamiyo flying above, scroll already beginning to unroll.

But Kaito was anxious, and too hungry for a fight. He took one look at the stone lantern perched in the nearby garden, and used his mind to send it flying toward Tezzeret. The object smashed against Tezzeret’s shoulder, sending him wobbling over the roof tiles. He spun, livid, and spotted Tamiyo first.

The recognition in his eyes when he spotted the Reality Chip on her exposed hand was unmistakable.

Tamiyo didn't get a chance to read her scroll; Tezzeret used his power to summon a bladed electric fan from a sand garden on the other side of the wall, and hurled it toward her. When it was only an arm's length away, Tezzeret made a fist with his hand, and the ornament exploded.

Sand hit Tamiyo's eyes, and when she recoiled, her scroll fell.

Kaito leapt to meet them on the roof, not bothering to reach for his sword. His weapons would not help him now; not when every one of them was enhanced with Futurist technology.

With both hands in front of him, Kaito pulled several tiles from the roof and sent them toward Tezzeret like an onslaught of arrows. Tamiyo floated back, squinting as she searched the garden for the scroll that had fallen.

Kaito charged before Tezzeret had time to recover, swinging his leg around until his foot collided against Tezzeret's chin. Again Tezzeret stumbled, jaw clenched and hands becoming fists.

Kaito could feel the thrum of Tezzeret's power pulling at every scrap of tech on his body—every weapon and piece of armor… All of it made Kaito vulnerable.



But this was Kamigawa. Kaito's home. And he'd spend most of his life scaling the rooftops, making sure the next time he met the man in front of him, he'd be ready.

There was nothing vulnerable about retribution. If anything, it made Kaito stronger. His heart was in this fight, far more than Tezzeret's could ever be.

Kaito shook off the bulk of his enhanced gear, letting his knives and pocket-sized devices trickle down the roof like heavy rain. He didn't need them. Not for this fight.

Kaito's fist met Tezzeret's cheek. He swung with unrelenting force, pushing Tezzeret back across the roof, throwing punch after punch.

Tezzeret brought his metal arm up in defense. This time when Kaito swung, Tezzeret snatched his shirt, pulling him close. Only a fist of metal remained between them.

"You and I were here once before," Tezzeret seethed. "And it didn't end well for you."

"Well, you know what they say—if at first you don't succeed…" Kaito braced himself. "…then next time, bring a friend."

Tezzeret paused, confusion taking over, when his mouth tore open and he let out a pain-stricken howl. He released Kaito, stumbling back on the

ridgeline. In his thigh was a gleaming dagger, the gold handle carved with the symbol of the Imperials.

Kaito looked down into the courtyard where samurai and Uprisers had destroyed any semblance of order in the moss garden, and found Eiko. Beside her, Kaito's drone hovered in the air, and a matching blade was in one of her fists.

He gave his sister a mock salute before turning back to Tezzeret, who had only just managed to remove the blade from his wounded leg.

Tamiyo floated down, paralysis scroll stretched in front of her. In an instant, Tezzeret stiffened as if he'd been turned to stone.

Tamiyo didn't take her eyes off of him, and when she spoke her voice was like iron. "Tell the Imperials to prepare an appropriate holding cell. Somewhere without tech."

Kaito gave a curt nod. "I'll tell Light-Paws." He turned, getting ready to clamber down the nearest trellis, when Tezzeret's cold voice snapped like the crackle of a last ember.

"There's no need to keep me in Eiganjo," he drawled silkily. "I already have what Phyrexia wants."

Kaito turned, brow furrowed, and watched in horror as Tamiyo's hand flashed and the Reality Chip came to life.



Tamiyo wasn't prepared for the hold Tezzeret would have over her, or how it would sever her connection to her story magic. She reeled, face ashen, and clutched her hand to her chest.

Kaito barely had time to process her distress before Tezzeret lunged, grabbing Tamiyo's trembling body by her shoulders. With a snarl, Tezzeret lashed at the air with his metal arm, and a violent, jagged line split through the sky. The crack of electricity pierced Kaito's ears as he watched the portal grow to Tezzeret's full height.

Tezzeret yanked Tamiyo through the snapping light, and they both vanished from the rooftop.

Kaito took a step forward, blinking like he was trying to will everything back to how it was. But it was no use. The portal gave a metallic hiss and snapped shut.

Tamiyo—and Tezzeret—were gone.

…

Risona moved in circles, footsteps calculated and hair sticking to the sweat on her face. "I will not yield."

The Wanderer matched her pace. "Surrender is not a requirement," she said, voice echoing throughout the chamber.

The fallen bodies of Risona's Uprisers were slumped on the floor. They'd entered the temple, only to find the Wanderer waiting. Most of them were easy enough to take down, but Risona was stubborn, and her style of sword-fighting was brutal and relentless. It would've made most Imperials sweat.

But the Wanderer was not most Imperials. And unlike Risona, she had trained on more than one plane. Adapting was second-nature to the Wanderer now.

Risona rotated her sword through the air, building momentum for her next strike.



*"Eiganjo Uprising", by Johan Grenier.*



It would do her no good. The Wanderer could've ended the fight ages ago with a blade straight through her heart, but she was holding back. She wasn't after needless bloodshed—she was merely waiting for Risona to accept the inevitable, and avoid an execution.

Except the fire in Risona's eyes burned too strong for surrender.

Kyodai's layered voice carried across the mist on the far side of the room. *Your mercy would not be returned if the situation were reversed,* she said into the Wanderer's mind. *She has no interest in peace with the Imperials.*

Risona swung hard, and the Wanderer twirled out of the way with ease, exchanging positions on the opposite end of their imagined battleground. Huffing with exhaustion, Risona only gripped her hilt tighter.

The Wanderer's mouth twitched. She was focused on Risona's faltering steps, and the way her shoulders sagged with the weight of her sword.

Risona was tired. And the Wanderer did not wish to humiliate her any further.

The Wanderer raised her sword high. "Drop your blade. There is no need for you to die this way."

"You abandoned your people for over a decade," Risona seethed. "You know *nothing* of what any of us need."

Her words were like an icicle straight to the Wanderer's chest, even as she tried not to show it. "Leaving was never my choice."

"It doesn't matter," Risona bit back. "You were gone, leaving a weakened kami to oversee the merging of the mortal and spirit worlds, and a bickering, power-hungry court to rule in your stead. The Imperials have always had too much control, but your disappearance caused instability to ripple through Kamigawa. You may have Kyodai, but it is the *people's* faith that makes a true leader. And your people lost faith in you returning long ago—they will not see you the same way they once did."

"You stormed the palace and murdered dozens." The Wanderer's voice was like steel. "There is no amount of faith that could be recovered after what you've done."

"Perhaps not," Risona said, breaths uneven. "But it is far better to have no Emperor at all than one who cannot be depended on to stay." She raised her sword to the Wanderer's. "We will finish what we started."

Risona lunged—just as something flew across the room and cracked against the side of her skull, knocking her unconscious in an instant.

The Wanderer blinked at the stone lying near Risona's body, and turned to find Kaito standing several yards away. "Did you—did you just throw a *rock* at the leader of the Asari Uprisers?"



Kaito shrugged, cheeks pink. "I found it in the garden on my way in. I'm out of smoke bombs. And to be honest, after the day I've had, I'm not all that comfortable using metal."

The Wanderer went from aghast horror to something much more like amusement. And when she laughed, the lilting sound poured out of her like it had been locked away for far too many years.

...

Once Risona was bound in restraints and marched outside as proof the Uprisers had lost, the battle met a swift end. Between those who fled and those who surrendered, there were only a handful of defectors left for the Imperial samurai to deal with.

Kaito stood in the temple window, peering down at the grounds below. He could see Eiko giving orders in the distance. She was suited to Imperial life, even in times of crisis.

"Looks like they have everything under control out there," Kaito mused. "You'll be pleased to know that order is once again restored." He turned toward the Emperor, expecting to find her still basking in the relief of victory.

But the Emperor was hunched at the waist, grimacing in pain.

Her spark was destabilizing. And without the Reality Chip…

Kaito hurried to the center of the chamber, sliding to his knees. "Tamiyo has the chip." His stomach felt like it was ready to evaporate. "I—I don't know where Tezzeret took her." *I don't know what to do to help,* his mind wanted to scream.

The Emperor pressed a hand to his forearm, shaking her head. "I don't have much time."

Kaito's eyes burned. "There must be something left—some kind of research in the lab that could help keep you here."

When she didn't respond, he felt a familiar ache tighten in his throat.

Guilt flooded back to him, pounding like tidal waves, refusing to ease.

Kaito rubbed his forehead, jaw clenched. For the second time in his life, he'd failed to protect her. "I'm so sorry."

She looked up, expression soft. "This is not your fault, Kaito. It never was. And you have *nothing* to be sorry for. You have been the most loyal friend I have ever known—and I am grateful to you."

Kyodai's voice was layered with confusion and sadness. She swayed, shadows dancing below her, and lowered her head just above the floor. The black sphere in her forehead flickered like a light beginning to fade.



The Emperor watched the kami, conversing with thoughts Kaito couldn't begin to guess. But whatever was said, the Emperor did not balk, even when she was met with Kyodai's wails of protestations.

Kaito could see it in the Emperor's body language—the finality.

Whatever she was asking… It was the only way to help Kamigawa with the time she had left.

Finally, the kami bent her head.

The Emperor forced herself back to her feet and looked at Kaito, still clutching her ribs. "Find Light-Paws. And please—hurry."

Kaito didn't have to run far. Light-Paws and Eiko were already making their way up the temple stairs in search of the Emperor. In clipped sentences, he told them what had happened. What was *going* to happen.

He told them that the Emperor of Kamigawa was running out of time.

They burst back into the chamber, where Kyodai towered above the Emperor like a mystical guardian. The bond between the great kami and the Emperor had always been strong. The same bond was probably the only thing still keeping the Emperor in Eiganjo for a few final moments.

"Light-Paws," the Emperor said, lifting a hand like she was calling her advisor closer.

Light-Paws moved quickly, bowing at the waist. “Please—tell me how I can help you.”

The Emperor lifted her chin. “Kamigawa needs someone to rule while I’m away. Someone Kyodai and my people can look to as a true and rightful authority. It is the only thing that will stabilize our lands.” She paused. “Kamigawa needs an Emperor.”

Light-Paws didn’t blink, or breathe, or move. She stood the way the stone relics of the ancient forests had stood for thousands of years.

Light-Paws’ eyes fluttered. “You can’t mean that I…?” She couldn’t find the words to finish.

“Kyodai gives her blessing, as do I.” The Emperor nodded. “You will be my proxy, and rule Kamigawa for as long as I am unable.”

Light-Paws knelt then, forehead pressed to the ground. A sign of great respect. “I will do what you ask, and honor your legacy every day until you return.”

The Emperor winced, lips parted as if her tether to Kamigawa had finally snapped.

Kaito felt a panic rush through him. This was happening too fast. Too suddenly.

*He wasn’t ready to say goodbye.*





*“Regent’s Authority”, by A. M. Sartor.*

The Emperor looked at him. There was no joy in her eyes, but she smiled at him anyway, to offer what little comfort she could. “Kaito—” she started.

But Kaito didn’t hear the rest. The spark took hold of her, and the Emperor once again vanished from Kamigawa.

Kaito felt his heart shatter in a thousand places. Eiko gasped nearby, hand covering her mouth. Kyodai howled with the ache of a farewell.

Light-Paws continued to bow to the empty space the Emperor left behind, her seven tails draped against the floor. Finally she stood, turning to face Kaito and Eiko.

Behind her, a brand new tail formed.

And with the sunlight framing her kitsune-shape, Kaito and his sister bowed to the new Regent of Kamigawa.

…

There was no trace of Jin-Gitaxias in the compound, or anywhere else on Otawara or Eiganjo. Kaito's best guess was that Tezzeret took him through the portal after Tamiyo.

There'd have been no reason to return for just a body—which meant Jin-Gitaxias must have survived.

And somewhere in the Multiverse, Kaito felt certain that Tamiyo was alive, too.

"I thought you'd have left already." Eiko's voice sounded nearby.

Kaito released his grip on the railing and looked toward the rest of the balcony where his sister stood in her traditional garb. "I wanted to congratulate my sister on her big promotion. Senior advisor, was it?"

Eiko rolled her eyes. "I know you think it's ridiculous, but you don't need to mock—"



"I'm not," Kaito said, earnestly. He pressed a hand to his chest. "I'm proud of you, Eiko. Truly."

"Oh." She hesitated. "Well—thank you."

Kaito pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "Looks like the outer wall is almost back together."

Eiko's disposition shifted from sister to royal advisor, and her voice rose to match it. "There is still a lot to clean up. The Uprisers are not happy we've taken Risona prisoner. And the power shift within the court has been an adjustment."

"If you're worried about a coup, I have some experience with intervening—and a pretty good throwing arm," Kaito offered with a smirk.

"Kaito," Eiko said slowly. "As much as I look forward to having you closer to home, I am not giving you permission to throw stones at members of the Imperial court."

Kaito said nothing.

Eiko took a place beside her brother, staring into the clouds. "You're not staying, are you." It wasn't a question.

"I made you a promise." Kaito took her hand and squeezed. "I said I wouldn't leave without saying goodbye."

She shut her eyes and took a slow breath. “Are you going to search for the Emperor again?”

Kaito followed her gaze into the clouds like he was imagining another world. Another plane. “Yes—but there’s someone else I need to find first.”

He’d already been to Tamiyo’s home. He needed to be the one to tell her family what happened. To look them in the eyes and tell them he would search every plane to find her again.

He owed Tamiyo that much. And if she still had the Reality Chip, perhaps he could use it to track down the Emperor, too.

Before Kaito left the house, Nashi had promised as soon as he was old enough, he’d help look for Tamiyo, too.

Kaito knew what a promise like that felt like, so he didn’t point out how dangerous it would be, or how impossible it would be for Nashi to travel to other planes. Instead, Kaito told him he was looking forward to seeing him again someday, and left the child with hope.

“I know you can’t send a drone where you’re going, but…” Eiko shook her head, smiling slightly. “Just don’t wait too long to let me know you’re still alive, okay?”

Kaito nodded, wrapping his arms around her. “Okay,” he whispered against her hair. “But the next time we meet, it had better be in Towashi.



I’m not coming all the way back to Kamigawa without first filling up on curry and noodles. Priorities, and all that.”

Eiko laughed, shoving his arm lightly when he pulled away. When she spoke again, her smile faded. “You should see her before you go.”

Kaito’s throat knotted. He knew who she meant; he’d been avoiding Light-Paws’ path for days. “Things were awkward enough when she was an advisor. And now she’s the Regent of Kamigawa.” Kaito lifted his shoulders. “Maybe we’re not meant for a reconciliation.”

“Promise me you’ll try, someday,” Eiko urged.

Kaito stilled, running a hand behind his neck. “For you? I can promise someday.” And then he lifted a hand. “See you around, sis.”

She nodded, mouth flat as the tears filled her eyes. It was all the goodbye she could give him.

For the second time in his life, Kaito left the palace with no plans to return. He would master his planeswalking. He would search the Multiverse for Tamiyo.

He would find a way to finish what he started, and bring the Emperor home.



*"Tamiyo's Compleation", by Dominik Mayer.*



## EPILOGUE

"Arise, first of the Phyrexian Planeswalkers. You will not be the last."

Tamiyo's eyes shuttered at the sound of Jin-Gitaxias' voice. She sat up, processing the shapes around her. It wasn't the first time she'd been awake in the laboratory, but it was the first time it felt… familiar.

Frowning, Tamiyo reached for her satchel and pulled out one of her story scrolls. She stared at the parchment, watching as the words flashed with a metallic sheen and morphed into another language entirely. She read the Phyrexian text as if she'd been doing it all her life, and felt a strange contentment wash over her.

Phyrexia was her new home. She was a part of it, mind, body, and soul.

Tamiyo looked down at the chrome flickering across her arms like strange patchwork. It was as freshly polished as the rebuilt portion of Jin-Gitaxias' chest.

The monster shifted nearby, teeth clicking together as he studied the cable-like wires flowing with bright liquid. They trailed from Tamiyo's flesh to a nearby machine.

Tamiyo felt only gratitude to the monster. She had always loved her family, and would do anything to protect them. Now, she would protect Phyrexia with the same unfailing loyalty.

When Tezzeret's reflection appeared on one of the surgical glass beakers, Jin-Gitaxias turned, snapping his sharp jaws in greeting.

"Your presence has been scarce in recent days," the monster noted. There was a hint of sharpness in his voice.

Tezzeret brushed off the veiled accusation and lifted his metal arm. It glowed with a faint, pink energy. "Using the Planar Bridge takes a toll. I was recovering." He glanced at Tamiyo with distaste.

She tilted her head. Something was rattling him. Something he was attempting to conceal with irritation. "You do not like me. I can feel your truth." If he was not loyal to Phyrexia, she would discover the reason why.

There was a vulnerability in the way he watched her. Perhaps it was not solely to do with his damaged body.

Tezzeret bit down on his unease, replacing it with indifference. "You and your friends tried to interfere with Phyrexia's plans. I have no reason to like you, and even less reason to trust you."

Tamiyo could find only truth in his words, so she settled back in her seat, glancing briefly at the three iron-bound scrolls she swore never to use. She'd always believed they were far too powerful, and risked causing great destruction.



But she also promised to intervene if there was ever an immediate threat to the place—and people—she considered home.

Phyrexia was her family now. And there was nothing she wouldn't do for her family.

Jin-Gitaxias snarled. "Your doubt for the previous fleshling is understandable. But the test subject has proven a worthy candidate. To trust the Planeswalker now is to trust Phyrexia."

Tezzeret blinked, solemn. "It sounds like things are going well. Does Elesh Norn know you've succeeded in creating the first Phyrexianized Planeswalker?"

"She has been informed and has been suitably chastised for underestimating my intelligence." Jin-Gitaxias moved aside, metal body gleaming. "The work continues to progress, but there is still much to be done."

Research. Further data. *Progress.*

Tamiyo had traveled the Multiverse for knowledge. And if that's what would protect Phyrexia, then she would help in any way she could.

Her family would always come first.



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# STREETS OF NEW CAPENNA

By Elise Kova

# Episode I
# Homecoming

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NEW CAPENNA, THE CITY OF ANGELS AND DEMONS.
THIS METROPOLIS IS A TOWERING CITY
UNLIKE ANY ELSPETH HAS EVER SEEN,
DRIPPING IN CHROME AND CROWDED WITH WONDERS.

---

**TEMPLE OF THE GODS**

Victory and betrayal tasted the same—blood. It filled Elspeth's mouth, spilling out the edges with her shock. She gripped the familiar spear as if she could take it from Heliod's grasp and free herself from its blade. But strength was leaving her fingers faster than life was leaving her body.

Ajani roared at a distance, too far to get to them. But what would he do if he could? They were both wounded and weary from the battle with Xenagos and, even if they had not been, there was little point now. Her life had been forfeit from the moment she had made a deal with Erebos, God of the Dead and Heliod's sworn enemy, to bring back her lost love, Daxos. She had already bartered her life. Heliod was merely helping the process along and cementing his vengeance for all her transgressions.

"Carry her back to the mortal realm, leonin. Deliver her to Erebos," the god commanded Ajani. With a twist, Heliod withdrew Godsend—the weapon she had found originally as a sword from the heavens and that Heliod had transformed into a spear and made it her responsibility, her burden. Without its support, Elspeth collapsed, her knees meeting the hard stone of the Temple of the Gods. She felt the full weight of her mortality, crushing her as her body slowly succumbed to her injuries.

"If she dies here, she will disperse to nothingness." Heliod's eyes narrowed, their divine glow dimming with his disdain. Elspeth fought for words. But there were none to be found. She and Ajani had fought their way to Nyx to slay Xenagos and right the wrongs she had caused. They had won.

But her victory did not undo her transgressions and had only fueled Heliod's cold displeasure. He had resented her for the mysteries of her powers, for her deals, for slaying a god. Heliod had no warmth for her now.

"Elspeth!" Ajani's usual grace gave way to scrambling and jerky movements as he rushed toward her.

She pressed her hand against the mortal wound at her middle, as hopeless as it was. Instinct, really. "Ajani," she whispered, trying to lift her head. But it was too heavy. Her body was turning to lead.



His arms wrapped around her. The world spun as Ajani carried her through a portal out of the land of the divine and back onto the mortal realm of Theros. Her friend set her down gingerly.

"Hang on," Ajani urged, grabbing her hand. "I'm going to find help."

Elspeth blinked; each time was slower than the last. Ajani was there and then he wasn't. The world was growing hazy, oscillating between blurry and painfully crisp. His absence became more painful by the second. Cold. *Come back*. She didn't want to die alone, but she no longer had the strength to even call out.

Distant cries washed over her. Was a great battle taking place? Or were these echoes of their struggle against Xenagos rattling around her final thoughts? None of it mattered now. Her days of battle were slipping away, pooling beneath her.

With the last of her strength, Elspeth turned her gaze skyward. What she was looking for, she didn't know. Maybe she was looking for *nothing*. A spot of darkness between the stars to focus on. Quiet. Peace.

A soft exhale slipped through her lips. She had spent so long searching for a place to rest, to simply *be*; perhaps death was how she would finally find it.

The last thing she saw was a flash of light, cleaving the heavens in two.

Sumptuous disorder: both an aesthetic and a way of life in New Capenna.

The impossible city indulged itself on strong, gilded lines that soared upward and broke apart into delicate ironwork. The decorations mirrored the waterscapes and fauna of the terraced gardens that were the signatures of Park Heights. If Xander could capture it in the stroke of a brush or pen he would. But, alas, his talents had never lain in the making of landscapes on canvas.

And yet, the town knew his mark as well as those of the most famous creators. He'd painted it in blood enough times.

Xander stroked his beard, a slight smirk curling his lips. Those had been fun days, indeed. The days of a younger man, a man whom he had enough distance from now to notice lacked a little… *finesse*. Editing, as it were.

How he wished he could go back and repeat some of those early assassinations. To do them better. If he had the hard-earned skill and control that he possessed now with the body he had then—free of all its old, aching wounds and present ailments—New Capenna would know true fear. But time continued its march, dragging him and New Capenna along with it. The city he'd once prowled was vanishing before his eyes and these days he much preferred the company of canvas and sculpture over blade and mark.





*"Botanical Plaza", by Grady Frederick.*

It was a wonder, really, that the city still stood. It rose from vast emptiness and long-abandoned townships, a testament to the might—or hubris perhaps—of its long-forgotten founders. The barrier those builders had left behind remained, a last bastion of hope against a great, now-forgotten evil. But the danger that New Capenna now faced was not an external threat, but a rot festering within. The fragile alliances that fostered peace between the five families that ruled the city were being strained to a breaking point from which there would likely be no return. Some re-

lationships, once broken, could never be repaired. All Xander could do now was ensure that he and his family were on the side of the victors at the end of it all.

A knock on the door interrupted the thoughts he'd been worrying all evening. Xander drew a pocket watch and checked the time. A few minutes late. Permissible. "Enter."

"My apologies," Anhelo said with a bow of his head. He continued without lifting his face. "Matters took a little longer than expected to resolve." Concern weighed down his words; it made him look almost small underneath the chandeliers and overwhelming opulence of the room.

"You weren't delayed. You were giving me time to appreciate the new landscaping across the way." Xander motioned to the window. Workers had been out in the terraced gardens he so admired all day, changing flowers like hemlines. The greenery was breathtaking to behold, stitched together with unnatural streams and waterfalls, cascaded down the side of the building opposite the museum.

"Even still, it's not—"

"It was no trouble," Xander said with a firmer edge at the end of the statement. He did not need Anhelo's prostrations or verbal fumbling. All Xander required of his Deacon was loyalty. Unconditional, unabashed, *unyielding*



loyalty. And that he already held in spades. "Now, stand here, I need to make some modifications to your ensemble before your next assignment."

Anhelo crossed the room to a low pedestal, stepping up. Xander did the same, ignoring the cane propped against his desk. The old injuries didn't ache as badly today, which was fortunate since he needed both hands to take Anhelo's measurements.

"How is the Mezzio today?" The ribbon slipped between Xander's fingers, still nimble after all this time, as he confirmed the last of the numbers.

"How did you know I was in the Mezzio?" Anhelo seemed more amused than disturbed.

"What don't I know?" In truth, it was the smell. The oils of the shoe-shiners combined with the aromas of the open markets, the incense of the fortune-tellers layered atop, and the undernotes of sweat from the dance halls; it was a unique perfume that stuck to clothes and was distinctly the Mezzio. It clung to people as though it were a calling card sent to lure them back to the city's center, whispering sweetly of danger and decadence.

Anhelo's mouth tugged up on one side, a trademark smirk that revealed one of his vampiric fangs. "And that is why you run this town."

Xander chuckled, setting down his tape and running his fingers over the assortment of pauldrons he'd selected from his collection. Anhelo's

attire had been lacking for a few weeks now and that simply would not do. Moreover, he needed some changes if he was to blend in properly with the rabble of lower levels.

Every level of New Capenna held its own… *charms*, from the lowest rungs of the utilitarian Caldaia, reimagined in its ghastly fashion by Ziatora and her Riveteers, to the bustling midtown of the Mezzio steeped



*"Mountain", by Christian Dimitrov.*



in the crime and opportunity the Cabaretti promised. Xander's favorite level was, by far, his museum in the heavenly expanses of Park Heights. Which was one of the many reasons why he rarely left and Anhelo always came to him.

"If only I ran this town," Xander mused, finally settling on an adornment for the shoulder that would clip into a high collar of steel. It was closer



*"Forest", by Christian Dimitrov.*

to the chin than Anhelo usually preferred. But the Deacon wore his shirts open far too low in Xander's opinion and, when it came to fashion, there were none with a better eye than Xander.

"Something is weighing on you." Anhelo kept his eyes forward as Xander settled the pauldron on his shoulder, testing the fit.

"Many somethings."

"May I ask what they are?" Anhelo's pale eyes searched his face. Expectant, but not demanding.

"Where to begin?" Xander had returned to the table, pauldron back in its place among the lineup. He now examined daggers, poison rings, rings that also functioned as brass knuckles, and, his personal favorite, silencing cuffs that reduced the sound and flash of magic to almost nothing, the perfect tool for an assassin. "This, I suppose," Xander chose both a cuff and a thought. "The balance of power in this town is shifting."

"I've heard the whispers—the Adversary, they call him."

"I am less concerned about a shadowy upstart than I am the supply of Halo. The Adversary is a brute and a symptom. Not the problem." Halo—the magical substance that had been sustaining power and life within New Capenna for years—had a dwindling source. Desperation for power made men clumsy and brash. And there was no greater power than Halo. If it were to ever run out, it would surely spell anarchy for New Capenna.



"The Adversary is gaining a foothold in the city. He's more than just an upstart."

Xander knew all too well the foothold the Adversary was gaining. The man had been slowly siphoning from the Maestro's ranks, promising them a steady supply of Halo in return. Xander hardly minded seeing the disloyal weeded out from under him. But where this Adversary was acquiring the magical substance was a greater mystery. One Xander was determined to solve.

"Perhaps so," Xander relented as he clipped the cuff around Anhelo's wrist. "But the Adversary would not gain that power without steady access to Halo."

"Do you think he's in league with the Cabaretti? They've been amassing their stockpiles." Anhelo curled and uncurled his fingers, no doubt testing his magic against the bracer.

"The Cabaretti demands are high in preparation for their Crescendo. If the Adversary had access to Halo and was working for them, the Cabaretti would have already consumed his supply." Anhelo considered this and, in his silence, Xander continued, "What I am most concerned about, regarding the Cabaretti, is this rumor of their 'new supply' that they plan to unveil during the Crescendo celebrations. That is what I'm going to need you to focus on—gather the information on what this source is by whatever means necessary."

"Spying? Sounds like a job for the Obscura, no?"

The family Obscura specialized in illusions, distractions, and manipulations. It was a natural inquiry and came off as curious, rather than accusatory, so Xander allowed the affront to his station slide. Very few in the Maestros possessed the rapport with him to inquire so boldly. "For matters involving Halo, I prefer to keep things in house and with the man I trust above all others. No one will know of this task but you."

Anhelo's smirk fell. He knew something deeper was amiss, of that Xander could be sure. Anhelo was his right hand, his Deacon, and he hadn't achieved that rank with obliviousness.

"There is more you're not telling me."

"Isn't there always?" Xander returned to the table of assorted tools, ready to step away from the conversation. For all he trusted Anhelo, information was like Halo itself—just a taste made a man strong and too much made him reckless. "I think this is just the thing to round out your ensemble." He handed Anhelo a ring.

"What does it do?"

"Look terribly fashionable."

Anhelo chuckled alongside him. But Xander's tone quickly became serious once more. "We must stay one step ahead. The powers of New



Capenna are shifting, and, if we're not careful, our position will slip out from underneath our feet. The Maestros have held onto our influence for far too long to let it go now."

"I will not let you down."

"See that you don't." Xander stepped aside as Anhelo stepped down from the pedestal. His final outfit was not what Xander would approve of, generally speaking, but it was what the Mezzio expected—practical, while maintaining just enough flair. Effortlessly fashion-forward. "I hear that the Cabaretti have been relentless in the Mezzio in search of Halo. Return there and see what you can find."

Anhelo departed and, rather than returning to his window, Xander headed to the far corner of the room. Behind a curtain was a locked door to which there was only one key, and it was perpetually within a hidden pocket on his person. The small storeroom was cramped with all manner of ancient relics. Statues of winged angels were locked in stony prayer, guarding the texts Xander had killed to collect and protect.

These were the last remaining histories of the founding of New Capenna, a time he should remember but that had become murky following his deal. Xander lifted two cotton gloves, donning them before leafing through the first text. He had read these words many times, but had yet to give up hope that somewhere in the annals of the past he just might find the key to their future.



*"Lord Xander, the Collector", by Martina Fačková.*





A lively tune soared to the upper archways of the Vantoleone. The warmth of the brass horns wove together with the trellised flowers that hung like chandeliers. Jinnie's foot tapped lightly against the carpet of Jetmir's office, in time with the thrumming beat and the thumping of patrons' feet as they swung across the dance floor below.

"Go and join them." Jetmir chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "These matters can wait. There's a party."

"There is *always* a party." Jinnie grinned and lightly stroked the cat curled in her lap. "But there is only one Crescendo and I want to ensure that everything is absolutely perfect for it."

"There will be another Crescendo next year," he countered playfully. "Assuming the plane doesn't end between now and then and there are still new years to celebrate."

Jinnie fought a roll of her eyes. Jetmir always knew just what buttons of hers to push and how to tease. But that was what fathers were supposed to do, even the adoptive kind.

"You know what I mean." From where she sat on the opposite side of Jetmir's desk, she could only see the glass ceiling of the Vantoleone and the mirrored figures shining against it. Tonight was a decent celebration,

as good as any by Cabaretti standards. But Jinnie wanted everything for the Crescendo to go off without a hitch. It was her foremost priority. “I’ve received replies from almost every family, save for the Maestros.”

“And the Adversary.”

Jinnie waved the notion away, causing the feline in her lap to give her a very offended look. She quickly returned to scratching Muri between her ears. “The Adversary isn’t worth inviting. Doing so would be a show of respect he doesn’t deserve.”

“It’s sometimes better to show respect before it’s due. You never know how a small friend now might become a big ally later.”

“You actually think he might form a new family?” she asked, incredulous.

“I think anything is possible in New Capenna.” Jetmir’s tone sucked the levity from the air and demanded Jinnie’s attention. She had known him for a long time—well before he was the wealthy head of the Cabaretti, and long enough to know when a matter demanded her focus. “He’s beginning to amass power, attracting loyalists with promises of riches and Halo.”

“Those who would betray their existing families because they think having some Halo gives license to start their own are not worth the blood in their veins.” Her words were venomous, lacking an ounce of compassion.



The only thing traitors were good for was being turned into examples for other would-be turncoats.

“I don’t disagree.”

“Besides, the moment the Font is revealed, everything in New Capenna will change and the Cabaretti will be on top.” Merely saying so aloud sent a tingle down her spine. The world was about to undergo a fundamental shift and she, who’d grown up strong and influential despite neglect and abandonment, would be at its center.

“How is the Font?” Jetmir steepled his fingers, claws lightly tapping. The light glinted off his signet ring, one Jinnie had kissed many times.

“In hand. No issues,” Jinnie was pleased to report. “Everything is just as we would hope and no one is aware of the Font beyond the inner council of the Cabaretti.”

“Then the Crescendo will be a celebration for the ages.” Jetmir tilted back his head and let out a roar of laughter. He was usually in a good mood. As the grandfather of the Cabaretti he had every reason to be. Jetmir had ensured the world around him was a celebration, filled with food and drink and dancing. It had never been hard for Jinnie to swear her life to him.

“Without doubt.”

"Now, you should go and rejoin the evening's festivities. We'll discuss the other details later. You're far too lovely to be cooped up in this office all evening."

"I could say the same for you." Jinnie leaned down, grabbing her purse. It bore the same crest as Jetmir's ring and the heavy gold bands he wore as ornamentation on his two crescent-shaped horns. Muri hopped from her lap and into the bag. Her other familiar, a dog named Regis, raised his muzzle from his mighty paws and regarded her inquisitively. She stood and the beast mirrored her movements. Jinnie rounded the desk that was between her and Jetmir, settling her hand on the cashmere scarf around his neck as she leaned forward to kiss his cheek lightly.

"I am not lovely. I am an old man."

"You are not that old!" She slapped his shoulder playfully. "And everyone knows that you are still the life of every party. It's why everyone wants to be a Cabaretti."

"They only think that because I bankroll those parties." Jetmir smirked. She could tell he was jesting. The Cabaretti were the beating heart of the city. They were joy. They were life. They were rhythm and music and sound and color. And soon they would be the ones responsible for giving New Capenna the Font and all the Halo the people could ever dream of.



"That is not true and you know it." She returned to her chair, slinging a bejeweled shawl over her shoulders. Its gossamer threads glistened in the light, looking as though she was wrapped in a spider's web made of diamonds. "But, you're right, I *should* return. I don't want to leave Kitt or Giada for too long."

"Give them my best." Jetmir pushed away from his desk, situating his own sash around his shoulders and taking up his scepter. At its top was the face of a crowned leonin—the symbol of the Cabaretti.



*"Jetmir, Nexus of Revels", by Ryan Pancoast.*

"Always." Jinnie flashed him a dazzling smile and stepped out the door.

Jetmir's office was upstairs from the main hall of the Vantoleone. Viridian curtains imprinted with golden flowers and shapes reminiscent of the peacock feathers that lined the hem of her dress muffled the music below. But the sounds returned in full as Jinnie emerged into the entry that led to the dance floor.

Two women lounged on a nearby settee, right where Jinnie had left them. Kitt's furred ears twitched, spinning in Jinnie's direction before her head did. Kitt knew her by footsteps alone.

"And how do the preparations for the Crescendo go?" A mere question from Kitt had a lyrical nature to it, as if her voice was always one short breath away from song.

"Swimmingly."

"Will I have my solo?" Kitt's mouth curled in a grin.

"Toots, was there ever any doubt?" Jinnie's attention settled on the teenager next to her dear friend. "And you, Giada, are you excited?"

The young woman forced a smile that didn't reach her longing eyes; the almost tortured expression was always odd to Jinnie. Giada wanted for nothing, Jetmir offered her sustenance, shelter, and luxuries. The air around her was filled with the finest perfumes. Her nails were perpetually manicured. Jinnie was always present to ensure no one would ever lay a finger on Giada's short, dark hair—currently pinned up with rare feathers. She had everything she could possibly wish for, with the exception of her leave.



"I am," she said. Though the words lacked sincerity.

Jinnie knelt before her, scooping up Giada's hands. "Good, because in no time at all, we're going to change the world."

### DEPTHS OF THE CALDAIA

Vivien Reid was on the hunt. Not for prey, but for something that might not exist. For a balance that could finally put to rest the ghosts of Skalla that haunted her every step. She searched for a place—a people—that saw the constructed and natural worlds in harmony.

But she was quickly learning that New Capenna was likely not that place.

Beyond this city was a world devoid of nature and life, fallen to ruin. Within its walls was a synthetic metropolis of steel. A temple to industry. The motifs found within the architecture were natural enough. Vivien could pick out the shapes of palms in fanned windows; metal had been hammered and polished to be reminiscent of waterfalls. But when there was actual greenery, it was encapsulated in concrete and iron, carefully

sculpted and plucked to resemble the zig-zagging patterns found in many of the citizenry's clothing.

Nature might exist here, but it wasn't *real*. This world was out of alignment, dissonant, and weighted at each pole of synthetic and natural, and she didn't give New Capenna long before it split at the seams. That was always the way of it when the scales tipped too far in one direction.

She had entered the city in a central location by way of one of the many trains and headed down from there, away from the soaring spires and sculpted reliefs of angels that looked down upon the city with their vacant eyes. Instead, Vivien had plunged herself into the reddish haze of the lower levels, searching for some long-lost connection to the earth below, hidden deep underneath the smoke and grime. Forgotten roots, but enduring nevertheless.

The well-paved walkways above had given way to suspended streets of steel. Vivien traversed girders with feet as confident as the citizenry. The locals seemed to have no problem scrambling from beam to beam—leaping across sections of open air with only a careful step separating them and certain death. The city above this underbelly was supported by columns shaved into impossible points, balancing on the tips of pyramids beneath.

She had seen many impressive places in her travels. But this was certainly a marvel unto itself… so long as she was willing to look past its grave errors in rejecting nature so completely.





*"Vivien on the Hunt", by Jake Murray.*

A raucous uproar erupted from the open doors of a nearby building. Abandoning her initial curiosity—an anvil surrounded by flames on a nearby platform—Vivien leapt from the girder she had been crossing onto one lower that connected to the doors. The light of the room within struck clean lines through the smoke and fog. Vivien slipped inside, her smooth movements going mostly unnoticed. Those who did see her paid no mind. They were too engrossed in the speech.

"—are not to take orders from the people sitting in the estates that we built, sipping the Halo that comes from *our* stores," a voice thundered over the assembled crowd, mostly composed of people in workers' clothing. The source of the declarations was a mighty dragon, perched high above them all. Judging from how the crowd hung on her every word, the dragon was clearly a skilled orator. "The Cabaretti demand too much for this Crescendo without spreading its benefits. The Brokers impose themselves on our streets. And I have no doubt that the Obscura are lurking among us right now, eager to report back to the highest bidders like the lapdogs they are."

The masses cheered agreements. Some grumbled grievances alongside the dragon. A curl of smoke escaped her nostrils before she continued, "They would do well to remember not to step on the hands building their cabarets and lounges. A few weak bolts and old beams can make such untimely accidents."

"You're not from here." A man bundled in heavy coats, gloves, boots, and a wide-brimmed hat approached, disrupting Vivien's focus.

"Neither are you," she appraised. He was nothing like the other workers of the hall and their practical garb.

He chuckled. "I am, at least, not wearing clothes from another world."



Vivien straightened away from the wall she'd been leaning on. The stranger's eyes were bright and shining underneath the shade of his hat. Something in the air around him, in the way he held himself, made her skin pucker into gooseflesh. He was *different*. And while they couldn't be less alike, they shared one distinct kinship.

He was also a Planeswalker.

"*Ah,* so you see it now, too. Come, let's share a word before the rabble is released from Ziatora's thrall."

The man left through the same doors she'd just entered, not looking back once, trusting her to follow. Vivien glanced between him and the dragon, still giving her speech. Between the two, he held more interest for Vivien.

"I hadn't been looking for another Planeswalker tonight… but you're a far better find than what I came in search of." He stood at the edge of a girder, looking out over the smoke and steel. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough." The noise of the hall faded away as she approached. He began to walk once more, staying one step ahead. Vivien let him lead, one hand ready to reach for her bow in an instant. She didn't come here looking for a fight, but she'd end anyone brazen enough to bring one to her.

"Long enough to know are others here like us?"

"Others?" More Planeswalkers? *Why?* She had come here for personal reasons, but it now looked like she had stepped into something deeper than expected.

"How much do you know about Halo?"

"Little." She had heard it mentioned among the citizenry and surmised it had something to do with the iridescent substance that filled the flutes of the revelers she passed. But Vivien hadn't had enough time to learn more than that.

"This world thrives on it, and it holds immeasurable power. The man I'm currently working for is in the process of acquiring it. But his real goals lie elsewhere."

"Which is?"

"Curious?" He glanced over his shoulder with a smirk. The sound of metal clanking softly followed his every movement.

"Perhaps." Vivien wasn't yet sure if she trusted him or not, but she didn't need trust to glean more information from him.

"Good, come along then. Urabrask will be eager to meet you."

She didn't move this time when he began walking. "And what is your name?"



He paused, then spoke without looking back. "Tezzeret, and I have people waiting for me, so if you could hurry along."

Vivien did not hurry. She did not move at all. While she had never met him before, she had certainly *heard* the name Tezzeret. They'd fought on opposite sides during the War of the Spark and she always had a sneaking suspicion he had access to the Planar Bridge. Tezzeret wasn't someone to be underestimated. If he was here, then there were deeper currents, indeed.

"Well?" He stopped when he realized she wasn't following.

"Let's get one thing straight…" Vivien hid her concerns and suspicions behind a mask of determination and crossed the gap between her and Tezzeret in a few long strides. Now, she walked at his side. It was tight on the girder. But she didn't relent any space to him. "You are not one to order me around."

Tezzeret huffed in amusement. "Understood."

"So, who is Urabrask?" she asked. A friend of Tezzeret would put her even more on guard.

"It's complicated." Tezerret's eyes were distant. He focused on a point somewhere beyond what Vivien could see. She knew that look all too well; it was the look of a man who had stepped between the veil of worlds

and laid witness to all the horrors that were often found between. “It will make more sense once you’ve met him. But for now, all you need to know is that he is on our side.”

“And what side is that?”

“The side of freedom.”

### MEZZIO TRAIN STOP

Elspeth startled at the transport that *whizzed* overhead, rattling on suspended tracks that hung a little too low for something so noisy. She blinked several times, eyes still adjusting to the bright lights of New Capenna as compared to the dim train. The city was teeming with people of every shape and size, wearing all manner of strange clothing.

Buildings towered above her, connected by a maze of rails and walkways, decorated with balconies and ornate designs that spoke of nothing but indulgence. Every ceiling seemed to be another’s floor as the city continued stretch higher and higher, reaching dizzying heights before plunging into the low cloud cover.

She adjusted the pack on her shoulder. It contained what meager possessions she could think to bring when she’d planeswalked to this world. What little she still had to her name after everything she’d been through.





*“Plains”, by Thomas Stoop.*

Elspeth swallowed the initial sense of disappointment that the city wasn’t what she’d been expecting. What expectations could she reasonably carry? None. It was unfair to have preconceived notions while searching for a place that she had long stopped believing existed.

“Home,” Elspeth murmured, seeing if the word fit New Capenna when said aloud. It was no better. “Ajani said this was it.”

Her friend had never lied to her and had always given sound council, even when she didn't want to hear it. She had every reason to trust him. If he said this was her home then it surely must be. She had been searching, dreaming, and longing for this moment for years…

So why had she never felt more out of place?



*"Skybridge Towers", by Sam Chivers.*

# Episode II
# Dirty Laundry

IN THE CITY, BUT NOT YET OF THE CITY,
ELSPETH WORKS TO LEARN HOW THE CITY WORKS.

### MEZZIO STATION

New Capenna was a blur. Elspeth held onto a pole in the train car as it jostled down the tracks, but doing so was unnecessary when she was packed so tightly alongside other commuters that it was impossible to move anyway. With a lurch and a groan, the train came to a halt at the main station for the Mezzio—the beating heart of the city—and exhaled smoke and people.

From this station, golden elevators in the shapes of giant beetle shells lifted the wealthy to Park Heights. Workers rose from Caldaia via steam-filled stairwells. She fit in easier with the latter than the glittering fashions of the former.

Elspeth assessed her clothing. Her trousers were plain and sturdy and she'd rolled up her sleeves and kept her vest open to fight against the heat of the train. Even though the dome surrounding New Capenna kept



*"Skybridge Towers", by Muhammad Firdaus.*

the city consistently temperate, it was sweltering among all those bodies. Her labors also kept her temperature high throughout the day. As eager as she would be to indulge the fancier fashions of New Capenna, survival was her first focus.

And survival meant practical clothes she could work in.



She kept her head down and took odd jobs throughout the city as she could find them. On the surface, she was no different than any of the others. *And yet…* Elspeth rubbed her midsection lightly. There was still a hollow feeling that had been carved into her by Godsend's blade when Heliod impaled her. She had been hoping to heal that ache in New Capenna, but she still didn't feel quite right in this new place.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't see the sprinting leonin until it was too late.

The man barreled right into her and they both ricocheted to the ground. Elspeth blinked, dazed. The commuters flowed around them.

"Angels bless! Quit lollygagging and watch where you're going!" he grumbled, smoothing out his mottled brown fur and collecting the bolts of fabric he'd previously had tucked under his arm before they could be trampled beyond repair.

"Sorry about that." Judging by his clothes, he seemed to be unaffiliated with one of the families that seemed to rule New Capenna and for that she was grateful. Whatever government was actually in place wasn't very effective, since she couldn't even name it, but she could name the Obscura, the Cabaretti, the Maestros, the Brokers, and the Riveteers from memory.

"Sheesh, anyone ever told you to keep your eyes forward?" The leonin stood and left her behind.

The words rang in her ears, holding her down. Grounding her. The commuters of New Capenna continued to flow around her, some shooting her frustrated or confused looks, others ignoring her entirely.

But Elspeth was hardly aware of the people. In her mind, she was not only in a different place, but time…

**DOMINARIA, EARLIER**

"You're alive!" Ajani raced to her. His protective embrace crushed her.

Elspeth wrapped her arms around him, holding her friend in equal measure. The fur around his neck tickled her nose and cheek, bringing a smile to her lips. Happiness. Relief. *Safety*. It had been so long since she'd last felt such pleasant emotions that it was a wonder she could still feel them at all.

"I didn't believe you walked in the realm of the living until I saw you for myself." Ajani pulled away, settling his hands on her shoulders. His eyes were shining with emotion.

"I wouldn't have either, if I were you." Elspeth gave him a tired smile. "I'm so glad I found you." Dominaria wasn't one of their usual haunts. They had met here once before, long ago. She was relieved it hadn't been so long ago that she couldn't still track down her old friend in this



mostly unfamiliar land. "What brings you here? I would've expected to find you on Naya."

"After defeating Bolas I came here to meet with Karn and the Gatewatch to discuss the Phyrexian threat. But there will be time for business later." Ajani shook his head, as if dismissing the notion. "How are you here?"

"It's a long story…" Elspeth told him of her time in the Underworld following her death at Heliod's hand, and how she had tricked the God of the Sun into another confrontation. In so doing, she gave Erebos, God of the Dead, an opportunity to imprison Heliod. "…Erebos was so grateful to me for helping him settle the score with his old rival that he let me leave."

Ajani was silent for a long while after she finished. He stared intensely at nothing in contemplation. She had seen the look on her old friend many times and knew better than to jostle him from his thoughts when he was like this. However, usually, this expression didn't involve *her*. For as exciting as it was to see him again… a small part of her was afraid.

They had been apart for so long and so much had happened to them both. She had returned from the dead. He had begun working closely with Gatewatch and Karn investigating a looming threat. What if he saw her in a different light now? Would he judge her for the things she'd done?

He shifted on the bench they had sat on and slowly, purposefully, collected her hands in his. Staring her right in the eyes, he asked, "How are you?"

"What?" Elspeth sat a little straighter.

"Elspeth, how are *you*? You might be one of the strongest people I know. But I cannot imagine the toll on your body and spirit of what you've been forced to endure. The upheaval when all you've wanted for so long is stability. And Daxos… I know how much he meant to you."

It was her turn to look away. Otherwise, he'd see right through all her guards and into the profound hurt she still harbored. Elspeth wanted to be strong. She wanted to put all this behind her. But Ajani knew her too well for that. He knew how deeply she had wanted Theros to be her home, her rock, some stability in a world of constant upheaval. How much she had sacrificed for her lost love only to have him return as a man she no longer recognized.

"The hardest part," she began slowly, "is having nowhere to go. Calix hunts me, and while I think I can shake him… where would I go when I do? There is no future with Daxos, not as he is now. No world will ever be safe." And without safety there could be no home. That was a lesson she'd learned from an early age. That lesson was what had prompted her to seek out Theros—a land protected by gods. But if the gods didn't mean safety… then what ever could?



Elspeth laughed, a bitter note creeping into the sound as she thought of how hopeless it all seemed in that moment. "I fought so hard to escape Erebos's clutches, and for what? Some days, I don't know the answer."

Ajani sighed. "Elspeth, home is not a place; it is a feeling. It is the people who share your dreams and those whom you trust."

"That's easy for you to say."

"You think so?" He seemed mildly offended.

"You're at home wherever you go. I've always had to hunt and fight for mine."

"I am at home wherever I go because I am foremost at home in my own fur. You must first—"

"I don't expect you to understand," she interrupted and withdrew her hands from him. She couldn't bear the conversation for a minute longer. It was futile to even hope for him to comprehend the pain of being a lost child.

"You're right," Ajani admitted. "I might not understand the depths of your pain as acutely as you might hope. But you are still my dear friend, and I don't have to know every nuance of your suffering to see the wound and want to help you mend it."

"There's nothing you could possibly do."

"I can encourage you to *keep your eyes forward*. Look to the future. Don't let the demons of your past consume you."

"I have no demons." Saying so would've been far more convincing to them both if she didn't sound so bitter and defensive.

"Home will come from within, when you've reclaimed your purpose—look inside and trust yourself. If you don't, you'll never become who you are truly meant to be. You will never find peace, and there is no home if you cannot find contentment with yourself."

"I didn't come to you for a lecture." She pushed away from the bench, wrapping her arms around herself and stalking away. *Look within. Find peace, then find home. It's not a place.* The words stuck with her, uncomfortable. She couldn't escape them with a few steps; she might not be able to escape them ever. She needed to get away, clear her head, and hopefully gain new perspective from the distance.

"Elspeth."

She could hear him stand as well without looking back. "I'll think about what you said, but I can't talk about this now. It was good to see you again."

Ajani continued anyway. "While you were—" he clearly struggled with the word "dead" and said instead "—*gone* I continued your search for



your home in your honor and…" He inhaled deeply, as if bracing himself. "I found it."

### MEZZIO CLEANERS, PRESENT DAY

She paused outside her current workplace. The smell of soap hung in the air as bright and crisp as the finely pressed clothes in the windows. Her reflection was distorted in the glass, barely recognizable.

*Had Ajani been right about all he'd told her?* Was she comfortable in her skin? Elspeth shook her head and tried to push away the thoughts as she entered the launderer. She had to survive the day-to-day. Everything else would come in its own time… if ever.

"You're late," the shopkeeper said the moment he laid eyes on her. "This is a good job and you're not going to keep it if you aren't on time." Elspeth glanced at the clock on the wall, confirming what she already knew—she was here exactly when promised. "Don't look at the clock. The clock won't help you. The only time that matters is the one I say, and I say you're late. On time is late."

"Apologies," Elspeth murmured. She hadn't even bothered to learn her current boss's name. Her employer changed regularly in this city. No one wanted her for long when it was clear that she wasn't going to play their

backhanded and cutthroat games. It seemed pointless to get too attached. "It won't happen again."

"It'd better not. I can use muscle like you." He made a jerking motion with his thumb toward the back door. "Now, I have six bags for you to bring to the cargo trains, get to it and you'll earn today's wages."

Elspeth didn't waste any more time or words with the man, and did as she was instructed. The back room of the cleaners was separated into six segments—one for each of the five crime families and one for the general populous. Because angels forbid that even their laundry touched.

She hoisted one over her shoulder and made her way back out, lugging it all the way back to the central station of the Mezzio before hiking back. The entire time, Elspeth listened to the citizenry around her. No one paid her any mind, even when she lingered a little too long, or slowed her pace when there was a particularly fascinating conversation. She used every new job as an opportunity to learn all she could about New Capenna. Maybe, eventually, she would hear just what she needed to be certain this was her home.

The door to the shop was ajar on her last trip back, enough so that she could barely hear the conversation happening inside.

"… make sure you pay what you owe," an unfamiliar man snarled.



"I promise, I'll get you the money." The shopkeeper's usually stern, confident voice quivered. "Just give me another week."

"Another week?" A woman laughed. "You've had a month. We've been more than generous."

"Another day—two days—please, I'm begging you."

Elspeth had never heard the shopkeeper sound so afraid. So meek. A sinking feeling pulled her shoulders down, settling in her gut with the faint aftertaste of disgust in the back of her throat. These people were preying on the hard-working residents of the city.

*Should I intervene?* No, it wasn't her business. For all she knew the shopkeeper had done something to merit this fate. She should just ignore it and—

"Two days? I'm sure there's some money laying around." Smashing and breaking sounds were followed by gruff laughter.

A man's whimper, cut short by a dull thud and more cackling.

Elspeth was a blur as she pushed through the door, beholding the carnage the strangers had wrought. Mannequins were headless and broken on the floor. The formerly pristine clothes they had worn lay in heaps. The till was smashed around the bloodied and broken body of the shopkeeper, three men and a woman looming over him.

The four assailants' pale eyes turned to her.

"What do we have here?" a man with dark hair said. He had been the first voice she'd heard. The leader, Elspeth assumed.

"She's… She's just a customer." the shopkeeper fought for every word. He was the last person she expected to try and protect her.

Elspeth leveled her eyes with the leader of the group. "Leave."

"Pretty forward for someone who's 'just' a customer." His mouth curled into a sinister smirk. "What do you care about the old man?"

It was a good question; one Elspeth had no doubt she'd be asking herself later while tending to whatever wounds she was about to endure. But for now, she was focused solely on getting these people away from the injured shopkeeper. This had already gone too far; they were going to kill him if they carried on.

"Anyone who finds sadistic pleasure in beating up an unarmed man makes themselves my business."

"She thinks we're sadistic." The woman chuckled and cracked her knuckles. "Maybe we should show her what sadistic really looks like."

"Bold words to say about Maestro enforcers," a man with the sides of his head shaved said.





*"Maestros Ascendancy", by Jodie Muir.*

The Maestros. Elspeth knew little about the family other than whenever they were mentioned by the citizenry it was in the context of art or death; and their laundry always reeked with the metallic tang of blood.

"I'm feeling generous today." The leader eased away from the shopkeeper. "I'll forgive you for that poor choice in words and let it not be the last mistake you make on this earth if you empty the contents of your pockets."

"Funny, I'm feeling generous, too. I'm ready to let you all walk out of here with your kneecaps intact if you leave now," Elspeth retorted. People like this only understood violence. So if threats were what it took to lure them away, then she'd be the bait.

"Why you—" A man wearing red gloves growled.

"That's it." The woman lunged, but her leader grabbed her shoulder and held her back.

He glared, leaning toward his subordinate, their noses almost touching. "I'm in command here and we do not attack people unless I say so."

"But—"

"And I say that we're painting the streets red with her." He released the woman and Elspeth didn't wait for the attack to come. They had risen to her goading. She'd sufficiently distracted them from the shopkeeper and now it was time to save her own skin. Four opponents wouldn't usually be a problem for her, but given that they were armed to the teeth, a tactical retreat was for the best.

Elspeth dashed into the street, the four Maestros hot on her heels. She ducked and weaved through the crowded streets of the Mezzio. Most shot her dirty looks but continued about their business, fighting and bloodshed an all-too-common occurrence for the citizenry of New Capenna.



"You think you can outrun us?" The woman had caught up to her, pushing a couple to the ground in her pursuit. "We've trained for this and you're just some laundry helper."

She drew a sword from her hip, slashing it in a wide arc toward Elspeth and nearly nicking three bystanders. Elspeth dodged, dropping to let the blade fly over her head. The woman's arm was across her body, momentum still carrying the blade. Elspeth stepped forward and closed the gap, bringing her fist to the Maestro's gut.

But Elspeth was the one who released a grunt of pain and surprise.

Her knuckles met metal. Plate protected the woman's abdomen, hidden underneath the finely tailored coats she wore. The Maestro grinned widely, putting her fangs on display. *On top of everything else, vampires. Perfect.*

"Regretting your life choices yet?" she sneered.

Elspeth's response came in the form of disengaging and running once more. She massaged her hand, scanning the crowd for an escape. There was a small explosion and a flash of light. Magic streaked through the air like the tail of an angry comet. It hit the stone beneath Elspeth's feet with a small explosion, leaving a smoldering pockmark behind.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw one of the men lowering his finger and cursing. They were willing to fire at her with magic in the middle of

a crowded street. These people didn't care about others in the slightest. Which meant if they carried on here, there was the chance of an innocent bystander getting hurt.

The red-gloved man lifted his finger, pointing at her. Elspeth ducked, slid, and scrambled into an alleyway as another bolt of magic shot overhead. She pushed past some workers who levied curses at her back. They were quickly silenced by the four hot on her tail.

Elspeth took another hard turn, and another. But no matter how many times she doubled back or how many walls she vaulted over; they wouldn't quit their pursuit. Elspeth looked over her shoulder as she rounded another corner and skidded to a stop.

Wind howled in the void before her.

The road she'd been running down ended abruptly, a half-finished bridge extending out into empty air. More construction was on the other side of the gap between the buildings. Even if it wasn't too far for her to jump, the construction equipment opposite gave her no place she could confidently land. Angry, red smoke plumed up from the abyss beneath her, the lower levels of the city submerging into what looked like a sea of fire and blood.



"Well, well, cornered I see." The leader came into view. His lackeys were at his side, breathless and looking all the angrier for the chase she'd given them. "Where are you going to run now?"

Nowhere. She had nowhere else to turn. The only exit was behind them, or down. She eyed the smoke and smog of the Caldaia once more, seeing nothing that could break her fall.

"I had been feeling generous," the leader said. "I was just going to rough you up a bit, knock out a few teeth, make sure you couldn't say any more smart words. If only you'd stayed put."

He was lying, surely. Yet, guilt flooded her all the same. She had put all those people in danger as she'd run through the streets. How many people got hurt because she hadn't just accepted a beating? Or worse?

The leader raised his hand, two fingers pointed at her. Sparks collected around his wrist as the air itself writhed with invisible heat. "Get ready to meet your death."

She let out a huff of amusement. "Unfortunately for you, I already have."

He fired.

Elspeth dodged, rolling. She had to get back toward the safety of the building and road cutting into it. The sword-wielding vampire stabbed. This time she grabbed the woman's sword arm, using her momentum

against her to spin her into the wall. Metal rang out against concrete as the Maestro's head snapped back.

"How dare you!" Red Gloves lunged for her, taking her to the ground. Elspeth brought up a leg and pivoted to get him off. But she barely had a chance to stand before the other man was upon her. And the air around the leader was already sparking with magic again.

She was outnumbered and constricted. Elspeth traded blows with them, dodging and ducking. Eventually they would wear her down and she'd make a mistake from exhaustion. She had to disengage before then.

Or find a weapon.

A stack of long, steel poles caught her eye. They were identical to the metal jutting from the edge of the unfinished bridge. She jumped, another shot whizzing past her head as her hands closed around one of the rods.

Elspeth hoisted her makeshift weapon. It was a far cry from the divine spear she'd grown accustomed to. But it was the advantage she'd been looking for.

"What? Are you going to attack us with—" The man didn't finish the statement before steel met the side of his head and he crumpled.

The other two were frozen for a beat and simply stared. Their mistake. Elspeth swept the rod across the ground. The woman jumped; Red Gloves



had his ankles hooked. She pulled and then spun, bringing the blunt end of the steel against his temple.

Just the leader now.

"Let's not be too hasty." He held up his hands, but this time it quivered slightly. "We can talk like civiliz—"

He fired at her sudden movement, but telegraphed his aim. Elspeth dodged, closed the gap, and rendered him unconscious with a *thud*. The rush of the fight began to fade and Elspeth relaxed her stance, checking on each of them. She did not envy the ache they'd feel when consciousness returned… but at least they were all breathing. She didn't really want to kill anyone, and last thing she needed was the Maestros out for vengeance against her.

They might have trained to be the strongarms of a family. But Elspeth had fought with gods. They weren't going to get the better of her that easily.

Just when she went to return the rod back to where she found it, a slow clapping alerted her to the presence of another.

Elspeth pivoted, brandishing the pole with a thrust. It came a hair's breadth away from a man's chin. He had fair skin and dark hair slicked back close to his head and curling around his high, steel collar. Carefully manicured stubble lined his jaw and around his mouth, accentu-

ating a wicked grin. His armor was too similar to the people she'd just felled to be chance.

"Your buddies are just taking a nap." She looked him right in his pale eyes. "I don't want any more trouble."

"Looks like trouble found you today." And it haunted her wherever she went. "They're not my 'friends.' A responsibility at best. Clearly, they weren't ready to be enforcers. I apologize for their lack of grace." She wasn't sure if he just apologized for them not killing her faster. His eyes shone with what looked like amusement at her skepticism. "Say, if you're that deadly with a metal stick, what could you do with the real thing?"

"Your *'responsibilities'* are lucky all I had was this stick." She kept it at his throat. One jab at his windpipe and he would collapse. Though Elspeth had no more interest in killing them than she had in the others.

"I can see that much." The man lifted his fingers, pushing lightly on the end of her rod. "Why don't we put this away and talk?"

Elspeth held fast. "I have no interest in talking with you. I want to go about my business in peace."

"What if I have business for you?"

"I'm not interested."



"Oh? Already aligned?" He looked her from head to toe, chin tapping the weapon that he clearly felt unthreatened by.

"I have no allegiance to anyone and no interest in doing so; I'm just trying to make do. So will you let me leave?"

He sighed, a bit dramatically. "Fine, though it's a shame to see your talents wasted."

She kept her eyes locked with his as she eased away. But the man didn't make a move. Elspeth walked backward toward the pile of steel rods. Still no movement. She slowly returned the steel to its place, very aware that she was giving up her only weapon with a potential enemy still before her.

He put his hands in his pockets nonthreateningly. Elspeth side-eyed him as she passed. He let her go.

She was back in the shade of the building when he spoke again.

"You know, if you were interested in 'making do' a bit easier… there's good money in the work." Elspeth glared but he continued anyway. "Fine, not motivated by money. Halo, then?"

She stilled.

"Ah, always Halo, isn't it?"

Elspeth had heard the word Halo mentioned, but she had yet to find any solid information on what it was. “What about it?”

“You could get a regular tipple, if that is your desire. We might not be the Cabaretti, but that doesn’t mean our storehouses are dry.”

“Why do you think *I* would want it?” Elspeth asked carefully, trying to phrase the question to give away as little as possible. If his eyes narrowing slightly or his gaze becoming more curious than conniving or hungry was any indication, she failed.

“You’re not from around here.”

“Of course I am.” Elspeth shrugged and continued walking.

His footsteps were hasty behind her. “No, *no*… Anyone from New Capenna knows exactly why they’d want Halo. There’s always a reason to covet it.” He looked at her with new eyes. “You wear the fashions of New Capenna, but you’re clearly not one of us.”

*Not one of us.* How many times would she be identified as the odd one out? As the one who didn’t belong? It never became easier. Every time, the sentiment cut deeper than the last.

“It’s all right!” He must have seen her expression as he kept up with her fast pace. “We all start somewhere. Why don’t you start with the Maestros? We don’t have an opportunity for new recruits from the outside



ruins often—surprised anyone still lives out there, frankly—and if you’re curious about the history of New Capenna then you’ll be thrilled to know that all young family members start in the museum up in Park Heights.” The man came to a stop, holding out his hand. “Wait, where are my manners? Forgive me. I’m Anhelo.”

Elspeth regarded his hand warily. She imagined shaking it would feel like she was making a deal—one she didn’t yet know the terms of. Instead, she ignored it, continuing to walk. But said, “Elspeth.”



*“Anhelo, the Painter”, by Aurore Folny.*

"Elspeth, *huh,* you're a few generations out of date for a name like that." He chuckled and continued to follow her as the street opened up to a square between buildings. A fountain bubbled at its center. Elspeth slowed to a stop, staring up at the figures that crowned the carvings of the fountain.

"Oh, curious about that?" Anhelo chuckled. "They're all over the city, aren't they?"

"They?" She prodded lightly, seeing just how willing he was to give up information to her. To her surprise and delight, he continued.

"The angels." He nodded to the two figures, locked in battle. A winged woman held a sword triumphant over a fallen foe. But she wasn't the one that had caught Elspeth's eye. It was the hunched and spined creature reaching up for the stony woman with its clawed, bony fingers and open maw. A creature of sharp angles and nightmares. "There are sculptures of angels all over the city, as if we're supposed to revere them for an ancient battle or some such. But only thing they ever did that matters anymore was vanish and leave us the scraps to fight over."

An ancient battle. Angels. Elspeth stared at the creature the angel was locked in battle with. Anhelo might not know what it was, but she certainly did.

A *Phyrexian*.





"While you were—" Ajani clearly struggled with the word "dead" and said instead "—*gone* I continued your search for your home. I found it."

"What?" Elspeth spun in place, her sole focus on him once more. Her heart hammered. *Home*. The place she had left when she was a child and had never been able to find again.

"It's called New Capenna."

"New Capenna," she repeated as if trying on the words to see if they fit around the shadowy and unclear picture she had in her mind of home. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I was more focused on seeing how you were."

"This makes me excellent. New Capenna? Truly?"

"Yes, and according to Karn there might be more to its history than just your own," Ajani said with a heavy note. "There are plans to attack New Phyrexia, but we don't want to make any movement before we're ready—before we know we can win."

"What does New Capenna have to do with the Phyrexians?" Worry threatened to strangle her joy. Phyrexians sowed destruction wherever they went. Was there even a home for her to return to?

"There are rumors of a past incursion there, and since New Capenna is still standing, that means they defeated the previous threat."

"And you want me to find out how," Elspeth surmised.

"Exactly." Ajani grabbed her shoulder as she moved to leave. "Before you go… promise me you'll think about what I said. I know this mission will be partly personal, and I hope you find what you're looking for—what you *need*—in New Capenna. But please, remember that nowhere will be truly home until you've made peace with your past. You've killed a god, you've overcome death, you've accomplished so much, Elspeth. If you can fight all that then you can also fight for yourself and find the security you're looking for within you."

"I'll do my best." It was true, and the most she could offer him right now.

"I know you will, and be careful," Ajani pulled her close for a final embrace. "Don't ever make me see or hear of your death again."

"I'd like to avoid that, too, friend," Elspeth said with a soft chuckle. Levity was filling her for what felt like the first time in years. She didn't look back as she walked off plane, headed for what she hoped was home.





"In any case. What do you say?" Anhelo pressed again. "Good money. Room and board. And all you have to do are a few jobs here and there."

*A few jobs,* she knew exactly what those would entail. Elspeth had no desire to get her hands bloodied in the turf wars of New Capenna. But if what he was saying was true then this was the best opportunity she'd found so far to learn more about this strange place and uncover its truths. To find out if Ajani was right and this really was her home.

"And the Maestros' museum has more information on sculptures like this?"

"More information?" He laughed. "Even better. The family owns *hundreds* of sculptures like this thanks to our curator."

"All right," Elspeth reluctantly agreed. She didn't want to work with a family, but it was a necessary means to an end. At the very least, they would hopefully have information on the Phyrexians Ajani and Gatewatch needed.

"You won't regret it." Anhelo wrapped his arm around her shoulder, guiding her. "The Maestros pride ourselves on knowing New Capenna better than any. If it's information you want, that can be given in spades."

His expression was smug. He thought he had found the carrot she would blindly follow. And he was right, in part. But Elspeth was going into this with both eyes open. She wasn't going to be used by forces in power.



*"Hostile Takeover", by Vincent Proce.*



## EPILOGUE – A BACK ROOM

The Adversary sat in a mirrored room, its entrance hidden behind a barroom bookcase. To enter the establishment one needed to know a secret knock, and a magical touch. To enter this room, one had to be willing to gamble with their lives.

His loyal lieutenants and officers surrounded him. Means to an end, the whole lot of them. He would use them as long as they had breath and proved themselves useful. A sickly purple light hung overhead.

"… and that is what the Font truly is," said the highest ranked among them.

The Adversary considered this and let out a bark of laughter. *Really.* The Font was *that*? Pathetic. So much power so ripe for the taking and the Cabaretti were practically asking for it to be stolen.

"You know what this means, don't you?" he asked, uncorking a bottle of Halo. The others watched him with hungry eyes as he poured glasses. "It means we're going to make the Crescendo one helluva party." Ob Nixilis passed glasses around to each, then lifted his in a toast. "Here's to taking over the world."

# Episode III
# Tests

PROVING YOURSELF A LOYAL MEMBER
OF ONE OF THE FAMILIES IS A LIFETIME'S WORK;
ELSPETH DOESN'T HAVE A LIFETIME TO LEARN
WHAT SHE NEEDS TO LEARN.

**MUSEUM**

Initially, the museum had been everything she'd hoped for. It was perched atop of one of the towering buildings of New Capenna in Park Heights. Anhelo had shown her to her "room." A barracks, more like, for new recruits. But she hardly minded.

Elspeth kept mostly to herself. She had no interest in cozying up to the Maestros. Anhelo might have said she was now "part of the family," but Elspeth would never feel such. Their fights were petty to her and methods dubious. These were not the sort Elspeth wanted to associate herself with.

But everything could be tolerated until she found a way to stop Phyrexia.

The sculpture of the Phyrexian remained in the forefront of her mind as she went about her menial tasks in the museum. She saw their monstrous shapes everywhere. Sometimes, Elspeth couldn't be certain she wasn't just inventing their shadowed outlines looming in the backgrounds of cracking portraits of warrior angels. But just when her doubt became strong, she would happen across a painting like the one she held now of a winged figure, praying as clawed hands stretched out of the umbra.

Elspeth turned over the artwork and made some notes in the ledger at her side with a sigh. Another day of cataloguing questionably procured art. Another day of feeling like she was no closer to the answers she needed. Elspeth ran her thumbs over the grooves in the ornate frame. There were secrets here, trapped in these relics of New Capenna's bygone days. But the Capennans who came before hid their tracks well and she didn't have access to enough information yet to begin piecing together this centuries-old mystery.

But she was fairly certain she knew someone who did: the curator. The leader of the Maestros wasn't collecting all these relics by chance. He knew something, and that theory was what Elspeth continued to stake her time with the Maestros on.

*Speak of the demon…*



The door to the cataloging room opened. In walked a horned vampire—Xander, leader of the Maestros. A man and a woman flanked him, intently listening to his hushed words.

She had met the curator and boss of the Maestros briefly when she'd first arrived. After introduction via Anhelo she had only ever seen him from afar. Even though their interactions had been limited, Elspeth was certain he knew something about the truths of New Capenna and the Phyrexians. Why else would he hoard such knowledge and relics?

Xander's attention swung in her direction, no doubt prompted by her intent stare. Elspeth didn't look away. She had been keeping her head down for weeks now, working hard and doing as she was told. But she wasn't going to allow herself to be forgotten in some back room, relegated to museum bookkeeper forever.

"Go," Xander said to the man and woman at his side, loud enough now for Elspeth to hear. "You have your orders." He then motioned to her.

Elspeth wove through the dusty crates, burlap-wrapped sculptures, and muslin-covered portraits to stand before him. She gave a small bow of her head. Enough to be polite and give him his due. But not enough to be subservient. The Maestros valued loyal soldiers, not bootlickers.

"Walk with me." Xander tapped his cane on the ground for emphasis, the furred cuffs of his belled sleeves nearly covering his hands complete-

ly. He led her out of the room and into the museum proper. “How have you found the family?”

“Well enough.”

“I hear no complaints about you. Your work is dutiful, skilled, and meeting expectations. Yet, no mention of you seeking to do more, either.”

“I am here to learn, not bloody my hands,” she answered honestly.



*“Cut Your Losses”, by Dominik Mayer.*



“But the price of knowledge is oftentimes found in the veins of others.” Xander’s eyes shone like the gold that capped one of the horns that framed his brow like an ivory crown. The other vampires of the Maestros lacked the feature, so it was not some quirk of the local variety on New Capenna.

“You’re saying I must kill to get the information I seek?”

“Not yet.” He hummed to himself. “Sending someone to take a life who’s not inclined usually ends disastrously. But I’m not a charity. If you want more than you have now, you must work for it.”

His cane tapped against the marble, echoing through the main hall of the museum. Pillars rose into the shape of angels that held up the glass ceiling on their backs. Elspeth imagined the very foundations of the city appeared as such: Forgotten founders straining to hold up a temple to excess.

“What do I need to do?”

“A few jobs.” Xander came to a stop. “But know that choosing this will start you on the path toward becoming a true member of the family. You’ll be in the Maestros for life. So think carefully if that is truly what you want. For, if it is not…” He pointed to the main entrance of the museum. “You are welcome to leave now. No ill will from us will haunt you.”

Elspeth glanced between him and the heavy doors of the museum. She hadn't come this far to back away now. Plus, if death couldn't hold her, Xander certainly couldn't either. No matter what he said, she wasn't about to be trapped anywhere.

She met his eyes. "I'm ready."

### STREETS OF THE MEZZIO

The small package Elspeth carried in a satchel at her side rattled softly. She was grateful Xander had given clear instructions not to open it. She really didn't want to know what was inside. All she had to do was get it from the Museum to a specific door in the Mezzio.

Simple enough.

Elspeth rode one of the city elevators down from the platform in front of the Museum to another hub. From there, she continued her descent. The entire time, she gripped the satchel carrying the parcel tightly. But no one paid her any mind.

She had been expecting there to be some resistance. But she moved effortlessly through the city. *Off a main road, down a side street, a hard left at the fork, across an alley, between two buildings…* Elspeth repeated Xander's instructions, following them to the letter.



It led her to an unassuming door, painted a deep navy, so dark it was nearly black in the dingy light of the alley. In place of a knocker or knob was a small sigil that looked like a palm, faintly outlined in charcoal that was only a shade darker than the door itself. The symbol was so subtle it'd likely be missed every time if one didn't know what they were looking for.

Elspeth knocked three times and the door swung open, revealing a young woman. She wore a sloping metal cap, its drooping brim covering the tip of her nose. Elspeth could only vaguely make out her eyes



*"Obscura Storefront", by Muhammad Firdaus.*

through the slit in its front. The smell of sandalwood and orange drifted on whisps of pale smoke that curled around her shoulders.

*Obscura,* Elspeth realized. Their laundry bags had always faintly reminded her of the incense they'd burned at the temple of Heliod. The scent carried with it an ache of nostalgia and Elspeth worked to banish Daxos from her mind as he crept to the fore.

Wordlessly, the woman held out her hand. Elspeth placed the package in her palm and promptly left.

### XANDER'S OFFICE

"I hear the package was delivered as promised. No trouble along the way?" Xander asked the moment she entered his office.

The whole museum was luxurious, but it paled in comparison to Xander's private quarters. Chandeliers glittered overhead. The crown molding was ornately carved with portraits of weeping angels and laughing demons. Everything that glittered was gold.

"No trouble at all." Elspeth refrained from asking how he already knew it'd been delivered. She'd come straight back. Then again, he had his ways. And that information wasn't what she'd entered this arrangement for. "Now, about the history of New Capenna?"



"I suppose one should start at the beginning when discussing these things." Xander rose slowly, favoring his left knee slightly. But he didn't take his cane. She'd only seen him use the aid outside of his personal quarters. "Our dear city was founded by an unlikely deal, brokered between archangels and demonlords."

"Working together?" Elspeth followed him over to a portrait hung underneath a spotlight. Sure enough, it depicted a winged angel and horned demon shaking hands.

"The enemy of an enemy is a friend, and that was no truer than during the construction of New Capenna."

"Who was their enemy?" Elspeth had a guess.

"A mystery I still hunt for the answers to." He rubbed his temples as though he was trying to remember something long forgotten, frustration tugging his lips into a line. "But it was a grave enough threat that the angels became consumed with the defense of the world. Though the details of that time often differ, depending on who you ask." Xander's eyes shone. "The most common tale is that it became clear the demons needed to join the fray as well. When they did, the demons appointed Five Families to take over the city in their name, drafting a pact with the head of each family."

Her eyes darted up to his horns. Xander didn't miss the look and chuckled darkly.

"Yes, I am, indeed, one of those original signers and have willingly become part demon, in addition to my other sanguine gifts."

"So you were there before the founding?" She asked. "But you don't know who they were fighting?"

"It was so long ago that I signed the contract, time and the magic of the pact have distorted my memories. I was also not present for the great battles that took place…" Xander trailed off, lost in thought a long minute. "It is part of why I hunt for the information now—to fill in the yawning gaps of my memories that threaten to swallow me whole."

Elspeth took pity on the vampire and didn't press the matter further. Instead, she took a different approach, remembering Anhelo's bitter sentiments about the angels leaving. "After the angels and demons disappeared, did the threat vanish as well? Did they win?"

"We're still here, aren't we?"

That much was obviously true. But Elspeth had been hoping for something more concrete to take back to Ajani. Xander spoke before she could formulate another question.



"I think that is enough history for one day." Xander crossed back to his desk, still rubbing his head with one hand. "Await my next orders and we shall speak again."

### MEZZIO WAREHOUSE

Elspeth shifted, wiggling her toes to try to restore feeling. They had fallen asleep in the first thirty minutes and she couldn't seem to bring back sensation without standing up. But doing so would give away her position unless she retreated away from the ledge. And that would prevent her from seeing the movements in the street below, so it wasn't an option.

*The informant will come out of the cabaret at approximately two hours past nightfall and then will head to her next location. You'll know her when you see her—she's one of ours. You are to watch her without being seen, making sure she's not bothered,* Xander had instructed.

It was now a few minutes after the scheduled time and there was still no sign of any Cabaretti vampires—

The green lacquered door to the cabaret opened and out walked a young woman, skirt swaying around her knees. She laughed, waving to the people still inside. But the moment the door closed her smile fell and her expression intensified. She strode down the street with purpose.

This was the informant Elspeth had been waiting for.

Elspeth clung to the shadows as she trailed the woman; leaping with light feet along the ornate decoration of the buildings, she kept in mind the lights overhead and how they might reveal her shadow. The informant came to a sudden stop, leaving Elspeth clinging to the back of a statue.

The vampire made a hard turn. Elspeth pursed her lips. *Trouble?* Perhaps the woman had seen something—or someone—she needed to avoid.

Elspeth followed her to a small tunnel that punched through the buildings and connected to a large warehouse. "Where are you going?" Elspeth muttered under her breath, jumping from the statue to an archway that connected the two buildings. She quickly scurried across, crouching low and staying close to the roof. Anyone in the buildings that circled this warehouse would be able to see her and she had no doubt she looked *very* suspicious. She needed to get to the street quickly to avoid attention.

Scurrying to a skylight, Elspeth peered down, catching a glimpse of her informant passing through an empty warehouse. No issues yet. It looked like the woman was headed for a door opposite where she entered. Elspeth sprinted to the far edge of the roof; a strip of alley wound between two buildings with mostly smooth facades—nowhere for her to trail from above.

However, off to the side was another alleyway…



*It might work.*

Elspeth dashed to the right side of the warehouse, stepping carefully to not alert the woman below to her presence. Sure enough, there was another narrow street that ran parallel to the one the informant was headed toward. If what she saw was correct, then she could make it through a small gap in the buildings to catch up to the informant by looping back ahead.

She wedged herself through gaps in the stonework. With a foot and hand on each wall to support herself, Elspeth moved carefully and quickly down to the ground, shimmying one side at a time. She was so focused on not falling that she didn't hear the sounds of squeaking and scurrying until a violent shadow lunged at her from the darkness of a nearby alcove.

"What do we have here?" the beast snarled, its furred maw close to her nose. "Fresh meat?"

"Get off me, rat!" Elspeth grunted and heaved the creature away. In truth, it looked more like a raccoon than a rat. But Elspeth wasn't about to correct herself as it snarled.

"We ain't no rats, let's show her, boys!" The raccoonfolk drew a dagger from his side. The alley was frustratingly narrow, making combat difficult. A feat that became even harder when three others like her first attacker launched themselves at her.



*"Smuggler's Share", by Aaron Miller.*

Elspeth dodged the blade and caught the creature by the scruff. "I don't have time for you!" she spun and used him like a battering ram to bowl over the others. To her surprise, it worked. While they were stunned, she took her opportunity to disengage, running down the alley and hoisting herself over a low wall and into the gap in the buildings she'd seen earlier.

She listened while watching and waiting for the informant. The raccoonfolk were beginning to rouse, but it sounded like they hadn't seen



where she'd gone. Heaving a sigh of relief, Elspeth continued creeping away, freezing when the informant passed, and then continuing on.

There were no further incidents. Elspeth remained out of sight all the way to the shadowed alcove where the informant came to a stop. The vampire knocked on the door and waited. There was a flash of magic and the door swung open, revealing an eerie purple light.

Elspeth couldn't make out the words that were exchanged, but they didn't seem hostile, and the woman was invited in.

### XANDER'S OFFICE

"I need a weapon." Elspeth didn't mince words when she entered Xander's office.

"Why, pray tell?" Xander was seated behind his desk, per usual, poring over dusty tomes that Elspeth hadn't seen before. She'd spent enough time cataloging everything that came in and out of the Maestros' museum that she could identify by sight something different. *Special*. It was further confirmation that his rumored archives were somewhere close to his office. Likely connected. That was the real treasure she sought.

"You don't already know?" She arched her brows.

“Contrary to popular belief, I don’t know everything that happens in this city.” Xander had yet to even look at her.

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Good. That means I’m doing my job right.” He closed the book, finally looking her in the eyes. “The informant?”

“Made it to her destination without issue. Though the same can’t be said for me.”

“Oh?”

“I was attacked by raccoonfolk.”

“Nothing you couldn’t handle, I presume?” He arched his brows.

“I’m fine.” Elspeth helped herself to one of the two chairs opposite his desk. Xander seemed more amused than perturbed by her boldness. “But I might not be so lucky the next time something lunges at me from the shadows. I need something better than my fists to protect myself.”

He steepled his fingers and regarded her thoughtfully. “You will get a weapon when you have earned one and are an officer among us. Until then, you’ll need to make do.” A sly smile arced across his mouth. “Perhaps, you might find some more rebar and use that?”



Elspeth wasn’t sure if she found his remark amusing or insulting. She chose to ignore it and instead moved on, saying, “I held up my end of the bargain, now for yours.”

He chuckled, sliding a pendant along the chain at his neck. “Must this always be business? Here I was, about to offer you a nightcap.”

Xander lifted a small bottle and two tiny flutes from one of the drawers at his desk. Within the bottle was a faintly glowing substance. At the top, it shimmered like sunlight. Golden. Brilliant. Then it swirled down



*“An Offer You Can’t Refuse”, by Dallas Williams.*

through deep orange and into a purple as dark as midnight. The solution looked as if the cosmos had been distilled and pushed through a sieve, leaving only the base elements of existence behind in solution that was neither liquid, solid, nor gas—more like pure magic condensed.

"Is that…" Her voice had fallen to a whisper, as though she sat before the nectar of the gods.

"Halo," Xander affirmed. He removed the crystal stopper and the bottle released a sparkling sigh that ringed in the air above it before fading. "It seems a shame for you to have been in the city so long without having a taste."

He filled the two glasses to the brim. Even topped off, it was barely more than a sip. Elspeth raised the glass to her lips, studying the strange concoction. A moment of hesitation. Then she imbibed.

She hadn't expected it to be warm. It tasted of content, long, and lazy afternoons with Daxos. It tasted of sentimentality and homes that existed only in her memories and imagination. Consuming it wasn't so much drinking as it was *absorbing*. The Halo filled her with strength, with purpose. Her muscles were no longer exhausted and her senses were sharper. But, most impressive was the surge of magic coursing through her, demanding release.

"I can see its appeal," she admitted, setting the glass back down.



"It's enough for men to fight over. And fight we have." It was a bitter fact and brought the ghost of a scowl to Xander's face. "Halo was the last gift of the angels."

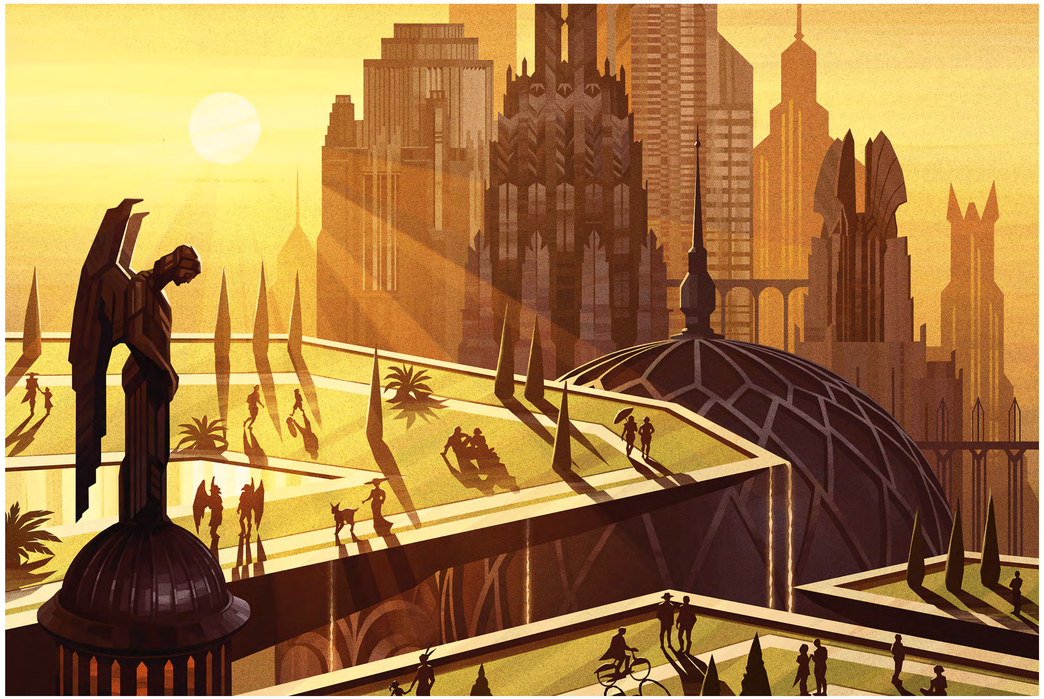
"Why bestow such a gift?" A possible connection was begging to form in the back of her mind. But she needed more information to confirm.

"Who's to know? Perhaps so New Capenna would forever be one, grand party." Xander chuckled and shook his head, as if he couldn't believe that explanation himself.

Elspeth didn't buy it in the slightest. Something so powerful and rare as Halo wasn't a cheap amusement. It had to have a purpose. And she was begging to suspect that purpose might have just been to help defeat the Phyrexians.

### CENTRAL PARK HEIGHTS

Tonight's job was easy enough. The vial of Halo was warm in her breast pocket. Elspeth couldn't tell if it was actually warm, or if merely holding it brought back the sensations of imbibing it. She just had to carry it to one of the wooded meeting areas of Park Heights, drop it off, and leave. No questions. No lingering. In and out.



*"Botanical Plaza", by Olga Tereshchenko.*

Comparative to the other tasks Xander had given her, this was—quite literally—a walk in the park.

Still, she kept an eye out for any would-be threats. There were a few late-night wanderers, but none that seemed particularly alarming. Elspeth gave others leeway, choosing darker, more secluded paths that rounded back to the drop point.



Sure enough, there was a brown paper bag left at the foot of a park bench like someone's forgotten lunch. She gave a quick scan of the nearby shrubs and trees and then went right for it.

A hand closed around her wrist as Elspeth reached for the bag.

Her eyes darted up the offending arm and met the emerald gaze of a human woman. Half of her hair was black, the other half white and tightly braided against the side of her head. She was as finely dressed as Xander, though perhaps a bit more utilitarian in her fashion. Elspeth didn't miss the arrow-head motifs in her clothing, likely due to the quiver at her back, and what looked to be a cased bow at her side.

"I was wondering who would come to collect." Her voice was a cool alto.

"I forgot this earlier," Elspeth said. This woman didn't seem like the one who was supposed to collect the Halo Elspeth was delivering. Something about her seemed *different* than the others of New Capenna. She hummed with a natural vibrancy unlike most.

*Ah,* she was like Elspeth, a Planeswalker.

"Don't lie," the woman said with a smile. "You don't seem cut out for it." Her eyes flicked over Elspeth, no doubt appraising the Maestro colors. "You also don't seem cut out to work for one of these families, either." The words were curious rather than judgmental.

Elspeth chuckled softly. “I have my reasons.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“I’m trying to learn more about the history of this world,” Elspeth admitted, deciding she had more to gain than lose by disclosing that information. Perhaps a fellow Planeswalker could help her cause. Or, perhaps this woman already knew something about New Capenna’s history.

“Why?”

“It might be my home,” she said softly. *Might be.* But likely wasn’t. The place she’d built up as home in her mind since her time in the dungeons as a girl likely didn’t exist. She would be forever adrift. “But more importantly, I think a threat is looming and I’m trying to get information on it.”

“One most certainly is and we share motivations. I’m Vivien, by the way.”

“Elspeth.” She saw no reason for deceit. Elspeth always considered herself a decent judge of character, and Vivien seemed trustworthy.

“Who are you gathering information for?” Vivien asked. Elspeth debated her response for long enough that Vivien said, “Let me guess, Gatewatch?” Vivien already had Elspeth’s interest, but now she had her undivided attention.

“Are you here on their behalf as well?”



“Originally no. But you know how these things happen. We might be able to—” Vivien jerked her head to the right. Her eyes narrowed slightly. “The goons following you are catching up.”

No wonder Xander always seemed to know where she was and how things were going. He *would* send people to tail her.

“I should go before they ask questions about me.” Vivien released her. “But I might have some pertinent information for you on this threat.”

“You do?” Elspeth took a step forward, voice falling to a whisper. She didn’t dare say too much outright.

“I have a lead that could prove interesting. You could come with me and—”

“I can’t,” Elspeth said hastily. “I have a chance to learn how the New Capennans beat—” she didn’t dare say ‘Phyrexians’ outright “—*the threat* before. I can’t leave until I have that information.”

“Very well.” Vivien didn’t press the matter, for which Elspeth was grateful. She needed a bit more time, not just for the mission Ajani gave her, but also for herself. “I’ll look further into these matters also and contact you when I have more information.”

“Why are you helping me?” Elspeth had been in New Capenna for too long. The idea of a stranger doing something for her out of sheer altruism had become foreign.

"Before you become too entrenched in this plane's affairs, you should have all the details of them," she said with a grave note. "Until we meet again."

"When?" Elspeth asked after the woman, not daring to raise her voice.

"When I have something worthwhile." Vivien gave a small nod of her head. "It's been a pleasure to meet you."

The foliage seemed to move around Vivien, for her, creating a clear path through the brush where there hadn't been one. Magic? Or a trick of how she moved—confident and without hesitation.

She could hear the movements of Xander's men on the path now, too. Elspeth crouched and placed the vial of Halo in the bag. Keeping her head down, she made her way back to the museum.

### XANDER'S OFFICE

"I'm sorry I'm late," Elspeth didn't bother pretending to ignore it. Especially not since he sent men to trail her.

"It's no trouble." He stood before the tall window behind his desk. Elspeth had begun to imagine him as a large bird of prey. As stoic as a statue, but capable of raining death from above should easy pickings cross his path.

"Thank you for waiting up." She came to a stop at his side.



"I have important matters to discuss with you." He glanced her way, a smile gracing his lips. "And, as I've already said, it's no trouble."

She laughed softly with a shake of her head. She might never fully understand this place or its people. And she certainly doubted if she would ever see eye-to-eye with Xander on most things. But he had never been unkind and, at best, she found herself forging an unlikely kinship with the old philosopher-assassin. No, kinship might be too generous… an understanding, perhaps?

"What are these important matters?" Elspeth asked, grateful that he didn't seem interested in prying into the source of her tardiness.

"What do you know of the Adversary?"

"The name has been mentioned." She'd heard the shadowy individual whispered in the barracks a few times. Always hushed. As if by simply saying his name too loud would invoke him.

"He's a threat to the very fabric of this city." Xander motioned to the window, across the jagged panorama of the skyline, turned pale in the moonlight. "There is peace in New Capenna because there is a balance—an understanding—between the Five Families. We have respect, trust, and cooperative competition."

"Cooperative?" Elspeth arched her brows.



*"Meeting of the Five", by Dominik Mayer.*

"Everyone operates within everyone else's budgets, so to speak."

"What a way to create order and structure."

"It might not be *your* way, but it works." Xander's hands settled on the top of his cane. "We've created order from chaos. A structure people can depend on and thrive within… and have a bit of fun while doing it."

"Fun," Elspeth scoffed under her breath.



Xander heard her. "Yes, *fun*. You should try and enjoy this life a little. It's thrilling—as long as you're on top."

"I wouldn't hold your breath," Elspeth said, deadpan.

"Don't worry, I wasn't." He smirked, briefly, but his expression quickly became grave once more. "The Adversary is a threat to everything. He's strangling the Halo trade and destabilizing the balance we've managed to keep for centuries by making people desperate. If the Adversary controls the majority of Halo the rest of us will be fighting over scraps. That will mean war."

"What do you want me to do about it?" She cut to the chase.

"You seem competent, resourceful, clever, and diligent. And, perhaps most importantly, you're still unknown in this town. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to go up against the Adversary. I want you to infiltrate the Cabaretti."

"What do the Cabaretti have to do with this?"

"The Cabaretti claim to have a way around the Adversary—the Font, a way for them to make unlimited Halo."

"And you want me to steal it?"

"No, of course not. I want you to find out if the rumors are true and, if they are, tell me where the Font is kept and leave a door unlocked. I'll take care of everything else."

"You're sure about this?" Elspeth asked, studying his milky eyes. "Isn't that an affront to the balance between the families?"

"If you do your job right and keep your loyalty to the Maestros a secret, the Cabaretti will be none the wiser of this slight. But their realization of my deceit is a risk I must take. Times change and these are desperate ones. If I played only by the old rules then I'd die with them. If war is coming, I will be the one to strike first," he vowed, quiet and deadly. "Which, speaking of…" Xander reached for a knife on the desk. It wasn't quite like the others she'd seen Maestros use—its grip was normal, rather than a horizontal handle perpendicular to the blade. But it was a fine and functional weapon. "This is yours."

"A knife?" She accepted it.

"You wanted one, and you have earned it, as an officer of my Maestros."

Even though she hadn't been looking for a place in this family, Elspeth couldn't stop the small swell of pride at the notion of a job well done. "Thank you."



"Thank me by proving you're worthy. If you succeed, I might gift you with a nicer blade than that when you return."

"I will, but when I return…"

"Yes?" Her determination always seemed to amuse him.

"I don't want another blade; I want access to your archives. I do this last job for you, and no more drip-feeding information. I need *all* of it. There's a greater threat out there than the Adversary. I know I will be able to identify that threat if you give me the information I seek."

Xander was as still as a statue. But she could feel the full weight of his assessment on her shoulders. She wondered if his trackers had heard her conversation with Vivien. If he knew she would bring the information to others.

"Very well," he said, finally. "Do this for me, and all the knowledge in my archives will be yours."

"Good." Elspeth went to leave but he stopped her.

"Oh, we're not finished yet."

"Pardon?"

Xander's face broadened into an amused smile. "You're not walking into any Cabaretti cabaret dressed like that."



*"Elspeth Resplendent", by Anna Steinbauer.*





Elspeth adjusted the feathered side cape on her right shoulder. She had been wondering the entire way to the cabaret just when Xander had begun working on this outfit. It was impeccably tailored and the plate fit her chest, shoulders, and hips immaculately while complementing the white silken layers beneath. But perhaps the most impressive element was the scale mail that hugged her legs, made to look like fishnet stockings. The diadem on her brow made her feel like a queen and gave her the confidence she needed to enter the cabaret Xander had directed her to, a location for new Cabaretti recruits.

After a quick scan of the crowded room, Elspeth went right for the bar.

"Halo?" the elf behind the bar asked, placing a small napkin emblazoned with the Cabaretti seal in front of her.

"I'm not here for that. I'm here for a job," she tried to say casually.

"I can't say I stock jobs here, just Halo." They chuckled.

Elspeth was already botching her attempt; she could feel it. She cleared her throat and tried a different approach. "I know the Crescendo is fast approaching and the Cabaretti must be looking for extra hands to help. I'd really like to work for the family."

"You think I can make those decisions?" they asked incredulously.

"I think you know the people who can."

"Why would I stick my neck out for some random stranger?" The bartender promptly turned to a leonin who arrived at Elspeth's left. "The usual, songbird?"

"You know me too well, Rocco," she said without looking up from the sheet music she was holding. It was a wonder she could see the staffs past the thick, feathered cuffs and collar of her gown. "Just enough to take the edge off before my set starts, not too much, please."

"You got it." They passed a thimble of Halo to the musician and turned to leave.

"About a job—" Elspeth started, trying to get their attention again.

Rocco gave her a look that said, *Who do you think you are?* and promptly walked away.

Elspeth bit her lip, picking lightly at the seams of her gloves. She had been too direct, hadn't she? Too forward. This was why she—

The leonin laughed and it took a moment for Elspeth to realize it was at her expense. "You want work that badly, hmm?" Her voice was lyrical, almost song-like.

"Who's asking?" Elspeth tried to curb her nerves. It didn't work.



"I'm surprised you don't know me." She ran her hands over the sequins of her dress. "Surely, you must have heard of the great songstress, Kitt Kanto?"

"I apologize, I can't say I have." Elspeth immediately wondered if she should've lied for the sake of Kitt's ego.

Luckily, Kitt didn't seem too perturbed. "Then you are in for a real treat. I'm on in less than an hour so be sure to give a listen, miss…?"

"Elspeth."

"Elspeth? Really?"

"Yes." Elspeth was unsure why her name had Kitt's ears twitching.

"Now you absolutely must come with me. I know someone who'll be tickled by a name like that." Kitt took the lead and Elspeth reluctantly followed her to a scalloped alcove lining the walls of the cabaret where two other women sat.

"Kitt, who's this?" The older of the two women raised a single brow. A dog curled at the front of the table raised its head in tandem.

"You tell her." Kitt nudged Elspeth playfully before sliding onto the bench.

"Elspeth."

"Elspeth," the seated woman repeated with amusement. "Never met an Elspeth that wasn't etched on a gravestone. Welcome to the modern day, doll-face. Love the dress, glad you didn't let the ghosts do tailoring that matches the name. I'm Jinnie."

Jinnie. The right hand of Jetmir, the head of the Cabaretti. Fate had smiled on Elspeth, it seemed.

"A pleasure." Elspeth's gaze drifted to the young woman at the table. She seemed underdressed compared to the rest of them. Her clothes were a size too large for her frame, as if she was trying to hide within them.

"This is Giada," Jinnie spoke for the teenager, slowly stroking the purring cat on her lap.

"Nice to meet you, Giada," Elspeth made it a point to speak directly to her. Giada only nodded.

"Elspeth was looking for work, specifically to help with the Crescendo," Kitt said. "She struck me as someone you'd like. With a name like hers and a fashion sense like that, she could be a worthy addition to the floor team."

"You usually have a better sense for these things than even I," Jinnie admitted. She looked to Elspeth. "Is this true?" Elspeth nodded. "Then I think I have a few small jobs for you. Who knows, if you play your cards right you might be in with the Cabaretti in time for the Crescendo. Trust me when I say, it will be a party you don't want to miss."

# Episode IV
# The Font

UNDERCOVER WITH THE CABARETTI,
ELSPETH PREPARES FOR THE CRESCENDO.
IT'S SURE TO BE A PARTY LIKE NO OTHER –
WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT ELSPETH
IS WORRIED ABOUT...

**MUSEUM**

These familiar halls, polished and carefully curated, were as sacred as a church to Xander. Tonight, on the eve of the Crescendo, he was determined to walk them all one final time and savor their splendor. Moments of peace were fleeting, and if his informants and assumptions were correct, there would be blood before the new year arrived.

"This is one of my favorites." Xander paused before a statue of an angel, cradling a babe. "Every time I look at it, I think of my own mother." If only he could remember anything about her.

"It's beautiful." Anhelo humored him. Xander could feel his general's confusion as he followed Xander about the museum. Anhelo checked his

timepiece. “My lord, if we are going to make the Crescendo on time we should begin preparing for our departure.”

Xander didn’t move. Instead, he continued to stare at the peaceful visage of the woman. Had there ever been a time in New Capenna where such peace and tranquility truly existed? Had there ever been a time in *his* life?

He chuckled softly to himself and murmured, “I’m going soft in my old age.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Xander folded both hands on the top of his cane. The golden claws he had adorned his fingers with tonight clanked against the metal. “You should go to the Crescendo and check on Elspeth in my stead.”

As of the last update Xander received from her, she had done well infiltrating the Cabaretti. But no word yet on the Font. Still, he had every faith in her. There was something unique about Elspeth. He’d quickly gleaned she would never *really* be one of the family; there was an air about her of greater purpose. Perhaps that was why he had ultimately decided to open his archives to her.

“Are you not attending?”

“Not this year.”

“But the Font—”



“I should like to stay here.” Xander interjected.

“Xander, what troubles you?” Anhelo rested his hand lightly on Xander’s elbow. The touch betrayed his deep worry. “You’re not yourself tonight.”

“You fret too much.” Xander patted Anhelo’s hand. “You will serve me best by going in my stead to the Crescendo. We wouldn’t want the Cabaretti mistaking my absence for a Maestro slight.”

“They will anyway, since I am not the leader of the Maestro.”

“But someday soon, you will be.”

“Pardon?”

“Go on. We will discuss more on these matters after the new year,” Xander encouraged. He had never outright planned succession with Anhelo. It had always been assumed, but in a distant, far-off manner. But there wasn’t time any more to prepare, and Xander could only hope Anhelo was ready. “Tonight you are to go and enjoy yourself at the Crescendo and report back on any strange happenings, that’s an order.”

“You’re sure?”

Xander looked back to the statue, using the motion to glance out of the corners of his eyes without Anhelo noticing. *They’re close.* “I am very sure. Now, *go,* Anhelo. Use the receiving door to leave.” *The back door most don’t think or know of.*

"As you wish." Anhelo bowed his head and set off. Xander watched him leave with a sigh of relief he didn't bother hiding.

He stared back up at the statue as he waited. Would he meet his mother again once he had departed this long-occupied and aching mortal coil? Was there even enough soul left in this old vampire-demon that there could even be an "after" for him?

Movement ended his musings.

Xander turned to face the living shadows at the far end of the hall. Into that gloom, he asked, "Have you finally come to kill me, Adversary?"



*"A Little Chat", by Matt Stewart.*





Elspeth stood on the dance floor of the Vantoleone with a platter in hand. Jinnie had kept true to her word. After a few menial tasks—not much different than the tests Xander had put her through—she had given Elspeth a position helping with the Crescendo.

As a part of the floor team, Elspeth was well positioned to see and hear everything. Moreover, she could move unbothered. No one paid any of the uniformed staff any mind. They were as unimportant as the pennons hung against the pillars or the overgrown flowerpots at the base of each one.



*"Cabaretti Courtyard", by Kasia 'Kafis' Zelińska.*

Well, she didn't go *entirely* unnoticed.

"Elspeth," Jinnie approached, her usual entourage of Kitt and Giada flanking her. "I'm glad we ran into you. I hope you're finding the Crescendo worth your effort?"

"And more." Elspeth forced a smile.

"Just wait, the real fun hasn't even begun yet." Jinnie helped herself to two of the cheese-filled pastries on Elspeth's platter and handed one to Giada. Per usual, the teen remained silent, her eyes hungry for something her mouth couldn't fill.

"I caught Kitt's performance already," Elspeth said.

"And? What's your review? Spare me no details!" Kitt perked up.

"It was lovely."

"That's hardly a critique at all." Kitt groaned.

"I'm afraid I'm not well versed in music so I can't give you much more than that." Elspeth offered an encouraging smile in an attempt to placate her.

"Speaking of performances, I need to check on something for ours," Jinnie said to Giada, and then turned to Kitt. "I could use your hands, if you don't mind?"

"For you? Never."



"Do you mind keeping an eye on Giada for a moment?" Jinnie asked Elspeth.

Giada wasn't that young to need a constant chaperone. But Elspeth had seen over the past few weeks how Jinnie doted on and coddled Giada. It was a relationship Elspeth had yet to fully make heads or tails of. She'd think it sweet and sisterly, if not for the perpetual discomfort that radiated off the young woman.

"It's no trouble," Elspeth said.

"Thanks, you're such a doll." Jinnie squeezed her shoulder and started off with Kitt.

"Would you like another?" Elspeth asked, holding out the tray for Giada.

"No, thank you." *So she* could *speak*. "I'm afraid if I eat anything else I'll be sick."

"Are you not feeling well?" Elspeth eased the platter away.

"Nervous," Giada admitted. "This performance means so much to Jinnie, the Cabaretti, *everyone*."

"What type of performance is it?" Elspeth worked to sound casual. A harmless question, nothing more.

Giada glanced askance. "You'll see soon."

"Sorry about that!" Jinnie promptly returned and took Giada's hand. "Are you ready to change the world?" Giada didn't have a chance to respond before Jinnie tugged her away.

Apprehension curdled Elspeth's stomach. *Something was wrong*. Every fiber of her being told her so. The sensation was further compounded when she saw Maestros begin to move behind Jinnie and Giada. She knew the look in the vampires' pale eyes. They were out for blood.

Elspeth quickly stepped away from the main floor and into a back room where she set down the platter. A few of the other floor staff gave her questioning looks, but none stopped her as she dashed back out into the main hall of the Vantoleone.

Giada was already on stage, Jinnie behind her. Four Cabaretti men manhandled a large, empty bottle up onto the stage, bringing it before Giada. The vessel was nearly as large as Giada herself.

"This year, the Cabaretti promised a Crescendo unlike any other. Now, we will make good on that promise," Jinnie announced.

Elspeth reached for the knife Xander had given her, hidden in her coat. It was the only weapon she had and the only thing she could conceal in the attire the waitstaff were all required to wear. Elspeth hoped she wouldn't need it.



Jinnie said something to Giada and the teen stepped toward the enormous bottle. She took a bracing breath, a look of sheer determination overcoming her. Giada touched it with both hands.

Light exploded.

The room let out a collective gasp of surprise. Like the rest of them, Elspeth was left blinking away the blue haze that the blindingly bright light left behind. As the stage came back into focus, murmurs rippled across the crowd. None could believe what they saw, Elspeth included.

The empty bottle was now filled with Halo. Tiny, golden bubbles rose from a cerulean bottom to a rosy top. Darker currents swirled within, like dusk filtering through water, and a distinct haze clouded the air around it, as if the condensed power within could barely be contained by its glass casing.

The horrible truth of what she had just witnessed began to dawn on Elspeth. There was no way the bottle could've been swapped. It was far too massive for that. It would take far longer than a flash of light to fill it.

"Your eyes don't deceive you." Jinnie responded to the collective skepticism of the room once she had managed to get Giada stable on her feet; though the young woman was still swaying slightly, visibly weary. "In front of you all, with no tricks or games, we have made Halo from *nothing*. You are the first witnesses of a new world order—an order that

no longer knows limitations and is no longer held back by diminishing supply." She paused for emphasis; the room was enraptured. Jinnie motioned back to Giada. "Behold, the Font!"

The crowd erupted with cheers. These people saw a resource, a tool, a solution to a problem plaguing them. All Elspeth saw was an exhausted and trapped young woman.

Their "new era" would come at the cost of Giada's life.

### MUSEUM

Shadows clung to the man approaching Xander. They hung to every fold in his pristine pinstripe suit, every hammered adornment of the armored plate that framed his shoulders and chest. Former attendants and allies Xander might have once thought of as his own family rushed around the Adversary's bat-like wings, weapons drawn.

The first thing he offered the turncloaks in return was a bitter smile. Next he would offer them their own hearts.

The last few loyal officers in his employ were already cut down, no doubt. Old wounds and aching bones be damned, he would return that favor in kind, even if it was the last thing he ever did. He had readied himself tonight. Come what may, he wouldn't go down without a fight.

The first of his former assassins charged.



Xander shifted his weight entirely onto his good leg, threw one hand back, tossed his cane up with the other, and caught it by its end. Steel rang out against steel as he deflected the assassin's dagger. The other vampire's eyes went wide with shock.

"*I* gave you that dagger," Xander snarled. "Don't think I gave you a tool I didn't know how to best." With a twist of his wrist, he disengaged from the blade and brought the handle of his cane into the man's neck with a satisfying crunch.

Another was coming for him. Xander slid his grip forward on the cane. He flicked his thumb and disengaged a secret locking mechanism. The hilt of the hidden blade popped loose of its scabbard. Xander grabbed it, slashing through the air and sending a spray of ash across the room.

He used the death as a distraction, strategically retreating into his museum. Others were already giving chase. But Xander knew the pathways better than any of his people. He had been the one who built this place. Its father. Its curator.

In the narrow access halls between the galleries, he could prevent himself from being flanked, picking them off one by one as they came to him. He might have them beat in skill, but he was still an old man. He could tolerate pain, but he didn't have the stamina to take them on all at once.

Xander crossed through the main hall of the museum. Shots rang out and bolts of magic chased his heels, leaving pockmarks in his marble floors. The quarry for this stone was no longer in operation; his pristine haven would never be the same after tonight.

He made it to a stairwell, gritting his teeth and ascending as fast as he could. Assassins scampered behind him, but Xander's knowledge of the museum continued to pay off and he managed to stay ahead. He burst through a door, wind accosting his face the moment he took in the crisp air of Park Heights. Breathless, Xander spun and barricaded the door to the viewing deck.

There wasn't much space on the balcony. It was meant to be a small sculpture garden, a reprieve to take in the splendor of the skyline among some pieces from the museum's collection. Xander walked to the edge, catching his breath.

*How he loved this view.*

Mighty wings buffeted behind him. With a rumble, the Adversary landed.

"Did you really think you could escape me?" His voice was gravel rattling against pure hate. "To a balcony!" He howled with laughter, drawing air into his lungs to stretch out his chest and expand his wings for emphasis.

"Hardly." Xander turned to face him. "I thought without your hired help we might have a fair fight."



"I don't play fair."

Xander didn't either. He lunged forward without warning. The Adversary went to deflect the sword with his bare hand, mouth set in a snarling grin of delight. Xander feinted, disengaged underneath the Adversary's wrist, and twisted to bring the point up right in the soft spot underneath the Adversary's jaw—the only vulnerable flesh exposed on his armored body.

But the Adversary was faster. Perhaps enhanced by Halo. Perhaps by an evil that was greater than Xander could ever imagine.

Xander never saw the Adversary lift his other hand to point at him.

The *bang* of magic reverberated through Park Heights. But the last thing Xander heard as he staggered away was the clattering of his trusted sword, the tool of his infamy, slipping from his fingers for the last time. His foot met open air and he plummeted into the clouds below.



*"Murder", by Yongjae Choi.*

The cheers of the masses turned into screams. All around them, revelers threw off the colors and signets of their family and reached for their weapons. No family was exempt from infiltration by the Adversary.

Elspeth drew the knife Xander had given her and began pushing through the crowd. The Cabaretti on the stage dropped the large bottle of Halo, the precious substance spilling a rainbow waterfall around Jinnie's feet. The Halo bubbled as if boiling, evaporating as starbursts and rings.

"Jetmir!" Jinnie called out over the crowd. Giada, forgotten, inched toward the back of the stage, gloved hands covering her mouth in shock.

"Jetmir!" Jinnie's eyes landed on a distant point, halfway through the room. Elspeth followed her gaze, seeing the horned leonin who ruled the Cabaretti, cornered and outnumbered. Jinnie leapt into the fray, weapons drawn, leaving Giada behind.

Shock and rage coursed through Elspeth and she channeled the emotions into a quick jab at a would-be attacker, rendering him harmless in an instant. Giada was their *precious Font*. She was giving her life for the Cabaretti and their Halo. And for what? To be abandoned. Sure, Jinnie had left Cabaretti agents with her. But they weren't enough to handle the seven others scrambling up the stage.



Throwing elbows, squeezing past people, leaping over bodies, Elspeth pushed her way through the blood and chaos to the stage. She vaulted onto the platform as the last of the Cabaretti guards fell, turned into pincushions by the Adversary's loyalists now advancing on Giada. Elspeth didn't waste a second. She brought the butt of her knife down onto the back of the neck of one on her right. The man on her left tried to jab for her, but Elspeth was prepared for the motion and grabbed him by the wrist, clutching in such a way that his fingers went limp. She spun as the third lunged for her, tossing the man into the new attacker.

"Giada," Elspeth said calmly, despite the rising chaos. She knelt down before the Giada, looking into her dark eyes, not unlike Elspeth's own. "Would you like me to take you from here?"

Giada inhaled slowly, the breath quivering at the end. "Yes." She spoke for the first time in what sounded like a hopeful manner. "I know a back door."

Elspeth nodded and stood, glancing over her shoulder at their assailants, rousing with groans. More had noticed them on the stage and were beginning to charge.

"This way." Giada tugged her hand and Elspeth followed her stage right. They ran past the panels of forest-green curtains and deep into the wings. The heavy velvet muffled their steps. But it also concealed those giving chase.

Elspeth strained her hearing to listen for their pursuers. “Get down!” Elspeth put her weight in her heels, holding onto Giada’s hand.

She spun the teen toward her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and bringing Giada to the ground with her as a blade ripped through the curtain at their right. Elspeth released Giada, rising. Judging from the slash, she could make a pretty confident assessment as to the build of their attacker. And when her dagger sank into a man’s gut with a gurgle, she knew she was right.

Stepping back, Elspeth gave Giada a nudge. “Keep going.”

If Giada was shaken, she didn’t let it show. She dashed off into the darkness with Elspeth close behind. She supposed Giada had seen far worse throughout her time with the Cabaretti. The thought filled her with a profound sorrow.

Giada was just a child. What had her life been like so far? Elspeth doubted it had been anything close to good. She knew a prison when she saw one, even if there were no bars and the wardens were dressed in sequins and gold.

“Over there,” Giada whispered, pointing to the left as they emerged from the curtains that hung along the wings. Elspeth followed her through stacked props and instrument cases. Two more men caught up with them, but Elspeth quickly dealt with them both. If she had time, she would



hide the bodies to cover their trail, but it was best for them to keep moving. Once they were out, they could slip into the city proper and get lost among the populace.

Giada grunted as she pushed open a heavy backstage door. Elspeth put her shoulder in to help. It hadn’t been used in some time and squealed loudly as it permitted them access to an alleyway.

The goons at the far end caught sight of them before they’d taken more than two steps, no doubt alerted to their presence by the noise of the



*“Gala Greeters”, by Bud Cook.*

hinges. Elspeth cursed their luck. Had they still been facing the other way she might have managed to get the drop on them.

"There's more coming from inside," Giada said, glancing back toward the theater.

"I know, stay close." Elspeth held out her knife. What she wouldn't give for a spear or sword.

"Looks like we have two escapees," one of the guards said.

"The Adversary told us no one is making it out of there alive—sorry, ladies." The other cracked his knuckles.

"Should we call for reinforcements?"

"No, I think we can handle these two on our own."

Elspeth could tell by their smirks that these guards underestimated her. "I'd like to see you try."

Without warning, a flash of green blazed through the air from somewhere behind them. Charged with magic and cool green flame, the arrow exploded with a howl into a viridian, ghostly wolf. It landed on the back of one of their first would-be attackers, driving him to the ground. The man yelled an obscenity, trying to twist away, but the spectral wolf sunk in its claws.





*"Vivien's Stampede", by Olena Richards.*

"What the—!" His companion didn't have time to finish. Two more shots were fired, summoning two more wolves.

The green-hued beasts made quick work of the two goons, their sharp teeth more effective than Elspeth's knife could ever be. Giada clung to Elspeth's side, half hidden as the creatures turned toward the two of them. Emerging from their spectral haze was Vivien.

"I told you I would find you again."

"Vivien." Elspeth heaved a sigh of relief and then looked to Giada. "Vivien's an ally; she can be trusted." Elspeth hoped.

Vivien's expression briefly touched on surprise, but she didn't object to Elspeth's claims. "I have news for you, on the matter we last discussed. But first, let's get somewhere safe."

Elspeth and Giada were halfway down the alley, nearly to Vivien, when the door to the theater blasted open behind them, launched off its hinges. The metal echoed loudly as it skidded to a stop. Jinnie, Jetmir, and a group of Cabaretti walked out from the smoking doorway.

"Oh thank goodness, Elspeth," Jinnie heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank you for keeping Giada safe."

Elspeth gave a wary nod, continuing to inch backward. Giada followed her lead, moving in tandem with Elspeth. She glanced down at the teen, who gave her a worried look in reply.

The same dread that filled Elspeth when Giada had taken the stage returned in force.

"Come, we have a secret passage out through the theater. Bring Giada here."



No. The word rose clear and true, resonated from the very depths of Elspeth's being. Under no condition should she ever bring Giada back to these people who would use and imprison her.

But it wasn't Elsepth's choice.

Elspeth locked eyes with Giada, trying to communicate without words. *I will do what you desire,* she thought, but didn't say so outright. She wasn't going to boldly go against the Cabaretti before knowing Giada's wishes. *What do you want?*

Giada's hand slipped into hers and she gave a light tug, much like she had when they'd started her flight.

"We're going somewhere safe. We'll return when things are quiet," Elspeth called back.

"*We* are 'somewhere safe.'" Jinnie's usually jovial nature began to slip away. Underneath was the woman who had earned her place as the adoptive daughter of Jetmir and his right hand. No one climbed as high as she did in New Capenna without leaving a trail of blood behind.

"It's better if we split up, for now."

"Bring Giada to me." Jinnie began to stalk forward.

Elspeth's grip tightened on her knife. She didn't want to fight Jinnie. The woman hadn't been unkind to her, but she was also the one who would turn Giada into a tool. Before Elspeth could make up her mind—fight or flight—a green arrow arced overhead.

It exploded into a beast far greater than a wolf. Clawing itself out of the viridian fire, the loops of a scaled dragon filled the alleyway. Two mighty wings stretched up to the very tops of the nearby buildings. Elspeth could only see the back of the spectral dragon, but if its front was even half as imposing, there was no way Jinnie was going to get to them.

Elspeth looked over her shoulder at Vivien who lowered her bow. Green-fletched arrows smoldered in her quiver, illuminating the braids on the side of her head.

"Shall we?" Vivien gave a slight smirk.

The three of them ran into the night.

### MUSEUM

"Not so smug now, are you?" Ob Nixilis wiped ash off his hands. The mighty head of the Maestros, the infamous Xander, *master assassin*. Not the master of anything now. Ob Nixilis snorted and spit on the mutilated body that lay at his feet. The vampire was hardly recognizable after the



fall, especially after Ob Nixilis vented some of his frustrations at the vampire's frustrating tenacity.

"Boss." A young man ran out of the building, stopping short when he laid eyes on the carnage. He was a Maestro. Ob Nixilis wished he could hear what was going through the man's head as he laid eyes on the mutilated body of the assassin he'd once so revered.

"What?" Ob Nixilis demanded.

"I…" The young man swallowed hard and tore his eyes from the remnants of Xander. "I have word from the Crescendo."

Ob Nixilis could tell by the man's shifting gaze and uncertain stance that the news would not be good. And if he was going to be given bad news, then he would sweeten it with a bit of torment first by making the kid sweat. "Good. Tell me of my triumph."

"Everyone was in place, just as you ordered. We quickly took control of the situation in the Vantoleone."

"But?" Ob Nix encouraged, allowing his voice to be dangerously quiet.

"But…" He fought for words, crumbling under the weight of Ob Nixilis's stare. "The Font escaped."

Ob Nixilis grabbed the man by the throat and hoisted him into the air. He swung like a ragdoll, kicking helplessly, clawing instinctively at the bracers Ob Nixilis wore. "Tell me, how did the Font escape if everyone was 'where they should be?'"

"We—we don't—there was another—unaccounted for," the man wheezed.

Ob Nixilis tightened his grip slightly and briefly fantasized about squeezing so hard the man's head popped off like a cork. But he released his grip. He still needed these worthless amateurs to do his dirty work. The man fell to the ground, clawing at his already bruising neck, gasping for air.

Ob Nixilis looked back to the remains of Xander. He grimaced, but not at the carnage he'd wrought. No… he was disgusted with himself. He'd missed something. Even from beyond the grave, Xander had played him.

"No matter," he snarled. "I'll find it, even if I must burn this city to the ground."

"Boss, the Cabaretti are all but neutralized—" Four other officers rushed out from the museum, stopping a few steps from their gasping friend. "We see you already know."

"Yes, I have been informed of your *failure*." Ob Nixilis forced the words through teeth clenched so tightly his jaw popped. "The Maestros are in hand. What of the others?"



"Jetmir escaped, but was gravely wounded. The Cabaretti will crumble once he falters—and we'll see he does," one reported.

"The Brokers and Obscura have crawled into their holes and shadows, though we pursue them as well. The Riveteers are thoroughly compromised. The fighting is hot in the Caldaia; we'll have the situation in our control soon."

Ob Nixilis cracked his knuckles and rolled his head. "I want the families' heads. *All* of them. Bring me every last one, attached at the neck or not."

"And the Font?" the only one of his generals still brave enough to speak asked.

"Two of you—lead the hunt for Jetmir and Jennie. If anyone will know how to track down the Font, it'll be them. The other two, form search parties of our own for the Font. And *when* you find it. Bring it to me and your cups will never be empty and your families will want for nothing."

### STREETS OF NEW CAPENNA

The city was on fire. The families were at war.

Elspeth, Vivien, and Giada fled through the streets, dashing up iron stairwells and onto rooftops as they raced through the Mezzio.



*"Rabble Rousing", by Nestor Ossandon Leal.*

"It never fails to astound me how quickly things spiral out of control once a balance is upset." Vivien appraised as they caught their breath.

"Where are we going?" Giada asked.

Elspeth wracked her brain. The early places she'd holed up in on arrival were now burning. The Maestros weren't an option, either.

"I have an idea." Elspeth recalled her second mission for Xander. "There's a warehouse not too far from here—it's abandoned. It *might* be safe."



"I'm not sure why you bother," Vivien said under her breath, for only Elspeth to hear. "These family feuds aren't the real threat."

"I don't care about the families right now." Elspeth turned to hide her face from Giada so their companion wouldn't hear. "I care about a young woman who's in danger." *Who deserves so much more than she's ever gotten.* Elspeth would've given anything when she was trapped and helpless for the first years of her life to have someone fighting for her. No one had been there, then. Filling that role for Giada now felt like breaking a cycle, like giving hope to the scared, trapped girl that still existed deep within Elspeth's soul.

"Then we see her safe and disengage." Vivien folded her arms. "You and I have more pressing matters to deal with. Things that only people like us can handle."

Elspeth had a thousand burning questions about what Vivien had found, but kept them to herself for now. There would be time to ask when they were no longer fleeing for their lives.

"Am I clear?" Vivien asked, direct but not unkind.

"Perfectly. We see Giada safe and then we move on."

"Good. Now, lead on to this warehouse."

"I will, but first, I'm going back to the Maestro headquarters." Elspeth started toward a nearby ladder. "I need a better weapon than a knife. You two wait here until I return. If something goes awry, we meet at the bench in Park Heights."

"Understood." Vivien knew exactly what bench Elspeth meant.

"What?" Giada grabbed her hand. "I'm going where you go."

"I don't think it's a good idea. It's too risky to bring you into another family's den," Elspeth said gently.

Giada considered it a moment, released Elspeth, then said, "You're right. I'll wait here with Vivien."

Elspeth managed to make it to one of the civic elevators without major issue. There were a few opportunists who made the mistake of trying to attack her along the way, but Elspeth could handle them with ease.

She knew something was wrong the moment she approached the museum. There were no guards out front. Ash dusted the entry stairwell, turning it as pale as bone. The Adversary's attack wasn't just on the Crescendo tonight.

Fortunately, her time cataloging all the various pieces in Xander's collection had given her an in-depth knowledge of the museum. She used



a side receiving door, smashing in the lock with her knife and rendering the blade useless. She was committed to finding a new weapon now.

Elspeth crept through the dark halls. The stink of death was heavy in the air. She could almost feel an ominous presence, stalking the corridors in the form of enemies she had yet to meet and was determined not to. She hid the second she heard footsteps, then used two connected rooms to work her way around the noise and into one of the armories.

What weapon to pick? Elspeth scanned her choices. There were daggers, whips, swords. Voices froze her in place.

"You don't think it was really the new recruit, do you? The one Xander seemed to take a shining to?"

Elspeth's stomach churned. The way the man spoke about Xander, the state of the museum… she knew what had happened here. Her hands balled into fists.

"It looked like her."

"The Adversary has deemed her as target number one, and the Cabaretti say she's out, too. Doesn't matter if she's the one who took the Font or not, she's got nowhere to turn; she'll be dead soon enough."

They were all after her now, starting with the two quickly approaching the armory. She steeled her resolve and turned toward the weapons. Hid-

ing or playing down her skill and powers from now on would be pointless. A sword it would be.

She didn't have time to carefully assess which sword was the best weight for her frame. She ran her hands over the hilts, wondering if one of these was the weapon Xander had alluded to when they'd last spoke. The voices were nearing. She picked one on nothing but instinct and fled into the night.

The way those men talked made her sound like an easy target.

She was going to prove them all wrong.



*"Most Wanted", by Rémi Jacquot.*

# EPISODE V
# Hymn of the Angels

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ELSPETH, VIVIEN, AND GIADA ARE ON THE RUN.
MEANWHILE, NEW CAPENNA RAGES
WITH INTER-FAMILY WAR.

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### STREETS OF NEW CAPENNA

"What do you think?" Elspeth asked her companions, perching on the same ledge she had used when tailing the informant. It was hard to believe her tests with Xander were already a few weeks ago. Somehow, they seemed both like yesterday and years past.

"It's the quietest section of the city we've seen so far," Vivien admitted.

"Giada?"

The young woman looked bone-tired, so Elspeth wasn't surprised in the slightest when she said, "I think staying here is a good idea."

"You look after Giada; I'll take a quick survey of the perimeter," Vivien offered.



*"Mountain", by Adam Paquette.*

"Thank you." Elspeth pointed to the side of the building. "The raccoon-folk were in the alley adjacent; keep an eye out."

Vivien leapt off the ledge, descending into the inky night. She continued to impress Elspeth. Every motion was sure and deliberate. Even though New Capenna was new to her as well, she walked like she owned every bit of glass and concrete without seeming boastful or prideful. She had adapted to the city more seamlessly than Elspeth had in what seemed like the same amount of time, even though it was supposed to be Elspeth's home.



"Elspeth." Giada broke the silence, saving Elspeth from personal turmoil and doubt.

"Yes?" When Giada didn't immediately speak, Elspeth turned her gaze to her. Giada was stretched out on the ledge, hands folded under her chin, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. Elspeth had felt that level of uncertainty before and placed her palm lightly between the teen's shoulders in an effort to offer some consolation. Giada continued to stare beyond the hazy skyline of New Capenna.

"I'm scared."

"What are you scared about?" Elspeth could think of several thousand reasons for Giada to be scared. But she wanted to hear which one of them weighed on her small shoulders.

"What if I'm not enough?"

"Enough of what?" Elspeth gently prodded.

"What if I can't help New Capenna? Can my magic really be enough? What happens if—*when*—it runs out?" Giada shook her head. "I don't know how much more I have to give and I don't really know if it'll make a difference if I try. This city is so… broken."

The words came out as a rush of air. As though, somewhere within Giada, a dam broke and these questions that had been slowly eating her from

the inside now found a free moment for release. Elspeth listened intently to her companion's heartbreaking inquiries. Each question colored one of their past interactions in a new light—tainted it with a shade of fear that Elspeth had seen in Giada but had never understood until this moment.

So much had been placed on Giada's shoulders, without giving her autonomy or credit. The Cabaretti, the families, the Adversary, all saw her as a solution to their problems, a tool. They would wring her dry for their cheap solution to the dwindling Halo supply until there was no more blood in her veins, marrow in her bones, or magic in her soul and they would do it without a second thought for her well-being.

Elspeth should have done so much more for Giada so much earlier.

Giada turned her eyes to Elspeth searching for answers that Elspeth didn't know if she could give. She wondered if this was how Ajani felt all those times she had gone to him in search of answers she knew, deep down, he didn't have. She wondered if Giada would resent her for her answer as much as she had resented her dear friend in those long-ago moments.

"You're right," Elspeth started softly. "New Capenna is broken and Halo is a flimsy bandage on the wounds of this city." *Real peace, real prosperity, had to come from within*—by addressing the demons that literally built the city and the figurative ones that still haunted its streets.

"What do I do, then? I still want to help—I want a purpose."



"Fulfillment… purpose…" Elspeth started softly, getting lost in her own thoughts as she had for months on this topic. But, for the first time, her chest didn't ache. The hollow feeling was not as gaping as it had once been. "Those things have to come from within you. I can't give them to you. No one can."

Giada frowned resting her chin back on her hands dejectedly. Elspeth lightly rubbed between her shoulders.

"But I'll tell you this, Giada. You will have the opportunity to find those answers—for yourself. You will find your purpose." *Just as I will.* "And I will personally ensure you are safe to take the time you need to do so, however long that is."

"You promise?" Giada turned hopeful eyes back to her.

"I swear it."

Their conversation was cut short by Vivien's return. She landed lightly on the platform Elspeth and Giada were stretched upon. "It looks sufficiently abandoned. No signs of life within."

"Good." Elspeth stood. "Then we'll stay here tonight and catch our breath."

Elspeth woke to a weight on her shoulder. The hazy light of dawn, spilling down through a skylight above, cast Giada's face in a warm glow as she slumbered against Elspeth's side. The three of them had huddled in a small office near the back of the warehouse. There was only one entrance and exit, easy enough to secure. And a mirror on the wall opposite the window overlooking the warehouse floor gave them a line of sight without exposing themselves.

"We should get moving. I don't think we're alone here," Vivien whispered, eyes darting to sounds Elspeth didn't hear. She was propped against the wall opposite them.

"Likely just the raccoonfolk. Give her a little bit longer." Elspeth had yet to move. She had never seen Giada look so peaceful. In every previous interaction, Giada had been haunted by turmoil that Elspeth hadn't understood until last night's revelations.

What was Giada's history? Had she always been trapped with the Cabaretti? How had she discovered her power to make Halo?

All questions Elspeth would keep wondering. Giada had enough asked of her already; Elspeth didn't need to be another making demands of her. For as long as she was able, Elspeth would keep her vow and protect her. That was enough.



Metal rang out, sharp and grating. Giada jolted upright and Elspeth's hand flew to her mouth. Her other arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders, holding the teen to her.

"Stay silent," Elspeth hissed, her eyes scanning the mirror for movement.

Vivien was on her knees, reaching for her bow as the door swung open and glass rained down around them, their peaceful morning shattering with the window.

Jinnie stood in the doorway. Two Cabaretti enforcers stood behind her, brandishing axes. In the mirror, Elspeth could see three more with swords drawn.

Before Vivien could draw an arrow, Jinnie threw a dagger at Vivien. Vivien raised her arm to block the dagger, which dug a gash down her forearm. One of the men rushed around Jinnie, knocked the bow from Vivien's wounded arm, and claimed it for himself.

"Not so tough without this, are you?"

Vivien's eyes shone with a challenge for him to find out just how deadly she could be, even without her bow. She smiled slowly, almost placidly. The sort of smile that promised to be the last he would ever lay eyes on.

"You didn't really think you could escape us, did you?" Jinnie stalked over, a knife in hand that she placed under Elspeth's chin. *How did Jin-*

*nie find them?* The warehouse was abandoned, city huge. There had to be an explanation, something they overlooked that allows Jinnie to track them. "To think, I trusted you."

The blade was warmer than the cold, hard stare Jinnie regarded Elspeth with. Even though she was still breathing, to Jinnie she was very much dead.

"I was trying to—"

"Spare me your lies," Jinnie snapped. "You in league with the Adversary?" The edge of her knife bit into Elspeth's neck.

"Never."

Jinnie probed with her stare. Finally believing her, she asked, "Then, why?"

"I was keeping Giada safe."

"Liar. You wanted the Font for yourself." Jinnie thrust the knife forward. A little further and she'd hit the vein in Elspeth's neck. Elspeth didn't even dare to swallow.

"Jinnie, isn't it up to Jetmir on how we deal with traitors?" Giada found her voice. Hurt and confusion flashed across Jinnie's face. Elspeth glanced toward Giada. Did she know what she was doing defending her? But Giada clearly had been learning from the Cabaretti as she deftly wielded her



words. "Let him decide what to do with the two of them. He always has a clear head. But *I'm so glad* to see you again. Thank you for saving me."

Jinnie's grip relaxed and the knife eased away from Elspeth's throat. "It's good to see you too. I thought we'd lost the Font forever."

"I'm right here." Giada smiled weakly.

"Yes." Jinnie exhaled anger, a cooler head prevailing. But when she looked back to Elspeth, the same hatred still burned. "Shackle them. We're taking them back to Jetmir."

"Are we going back to the Vantoleone?" Giada stood.

"No, it's compromised. We're going to friends," Jinnie answered ambiguously. "No family wants to see the Adversary take New Capenna for his own. And now that the Font is secure once more, we have a bargaining chip to make sure the others will work with us."

*The Font. Bargaining chip…* She *has a name*, Elspeth wanted to shout.

"We can all make it out of this alive." Jinnie's gentle tone was in stark contrast to the men roughly shackling Elspeth and Vivien.

Elspeth felt a tingle of magic singe her wrists as they were locked into place. Vivien seemed to be following Elspeth's lead. She paid careful attention to the Cabaretti man who collected her sword, keeping her pro-

tests behind firmly closed lips. Going along with this, for now, was the best way to remain close to Giada.

"And then you can bring balance to our world," Jinnie finished.

Giada nodded, her lips pressed in a hard line. Jinnie grabbed her hand and the Giada's eyes drifted back to Elspeth who dipped her chin slowly.

*I will keep my vow to you,* Elspeth vowed silently. She hoped Giada understood. But Giada kept her face blank as Jinnie escorted them out of the Warehouse.

**FORTUNE TELLER**

Elspeth and Vivien shared wary glances as they were escorted through the Mezzio. Elspeth didn't dare say anything with the Cabaretti so close. She'd find a quiet moment to regroup with Vivien whenever they got to this "safe place."

The aroma of sandalwood and orange tickled Elspeth's nose.

"Jinnie," Elspeth called out, stopping in her tracks.

"Keep moving." One of the Cabaretti shoved her. Elspeth stumbled forward, trying to use it to conceal wider than normal steps she used to close the gap between her and Jinnie.



"This is an Obscura hideout," Elspeth said.

"You don't think I know that?" Jinnie arched her eyebrows. "Who do you think my friends are?"

Elspeth's heart began to race. "You were at the Crescendo. The Maestros, Cabaretti, and Riveteers—every family was infiltrated. This could be a trap."

"Unlike *you*, some are actually loyal." Jinnie came to a stop before a door and knocked. It was identical to the knock Elspeth used when delivering Xander's package.

Elspeth stepped back to stand next to Vivien, catching her eyes. "Stay alert," Elspeth murmured. Vivien nodded. Elspeth didn't exactly have the most faith in Jinnie's ability to identify a loyal follower versus someone operating in their own interest. After all, she had thought Elspeth was nothing more than an eager sycophant.

The door opened before Jinnie could say anything more, revealing a cephalid woman in a navy trench coat, embellished with gold. Her clothing and cloche hat were of a similar make to the Obscura Elspeth had delivered the package to. The hairs on the back of Elspeth's neck stood on edge.

"Kamiz," Jinnie said with relief. "How is Jetmir?"



*"Kamiz, Obscura Oculus", by Chris Rallis.*

"Stable, though ailing. I see you secured the Font. Excellent, I knew you would. Come in, before anyone sees you."

"Thank you for offering us refuge." Jinnie stepped inside, the rest of them following.

"Who are they?" Kamiz glanced between Elspeth and Vivien.

"Traitors—the ones who took the Font. Jetmir will know how best to deal with them."



They entered a receiving area with a desk and a few chairs. Behind a curtain was a square table covered with a navy silk cloth. At the table's center was a large crystal ball and a deck of cards. Kamiz pulled aside a curtain to reveal a secret door that opened to a much larger back room. Judging from the crates and bookshelves that no doubt contained precious secrets, it was a resting place for Obscura spies.

"I see you were successful." Jetmir was settled in a lower bunk, a Cabaretti healer tending to him. The woman stepped aside as Jinnie rushed over.

"Father, how do you feel?"

"You worry too much." It was a non-answer. Even from across the room, Elspeth could see that Jetmir's eyes were dull. There was the heavy scent of blood in the air, a saturated cloth discarded at his bedside. He'd need a miracle to pull through.

"Giada, come, *come*." Jinnie waved the young woman over, fumbling with a satchel of supplies and producing a small vial. "Please, heal him."

Giada took the vial and her eyes fluttered closed. There was a small flair of light and Giada swayed, holding out the Halo to Jinnie. The vial never had a chance to exchange hands.

Both the door they had entered through and the back door were rammed open at the same time, revealing a dozen brawlers in aprons and heavy workers' clothing. Chaos erupted.

"Riveteers?" Jinnie whirled, her expression souring instantly to pure hate. "Riveteer *traitors*."

Vivien seized the moment. She balled both hands into fists and spun toward the man still holding her bow—arms straight like a battering ram to strike him clean across the face. Her bow dropped to the floor and she scooped it up. Still cuffed, she was unable to shoot with it, but she could, and did, use it to strike the other Cabaretti in the temple.

Elspeth forced power into her hands. It shimmered the air around her shackles. With a thought, her magic cracked open the locks and the metal fell to the floor with a clang. Swinging her hand, she cast the spell Vivien's way, her ally's shackles dropping as well.

"Where have you been hiding that trick?" Vivien appraised, collecting Elspeth's sword from the fallen man and tossing it over.

Elspeth caught the blade by the scabbard. "Tried to keep a low profile and save my skills for when I really needed them. Now seems like the time."

"Glad you finally joined the fight properly." Vivien shifted her grip on her bow, reaching for an arrow in her quiver. "Get Giada. I'll clear a path."

"Thank you." Elspeth scrambled forward, drawing her sword as green flashed.



Giada was cornered with Jinnie and Jetmir. Jinnie was putting up a good fight, but she was vastly outnumbered against the Maestro assassins and Riveteer brawlers.

*Were these brutes going to kill the Giada? Didn't they want the Font for themselves?*

Elspeth wasn't going to wait to find out.

She dashed to the right, swinging her sword for the Riveteer hoisting his hammer overhead. Her blade met his shoulder and he dropped his weapon before he could strike. In her periphery, another lunged for her. She caught his arm and disarmed him. Hooking his dagger with the toe of her shoe, she tossed it up, grabbing the hilt in time to parry another. A third was lunging for her and Elspeth dodged, sinking her elbow into his gut as she reared back to jab with the blade, sinking it between the ribs of the first attacker.

The fight was claustrophobic. Every movement Elspeth made had to account for the actions of several others. In addition, she had to keep an eye on Giada. Elspeth had made a promise that she would keep Giada safe until her last breath.

But there were too many and she could hardly tell friend from foe. It was only a matter of time until Elspeth made a mistake. She ducked away

from one man's swing, stepping back to get distance enough to swing her heavy blade. She didn't see the mallet until it was too late.

It smashed into her ribs as Elspeth had been straining to hoist her sword, knocking the wind from her. She could feel her chest compress, bones shatter. Elspeth coughed blood. A dagger skewered through her shoulder. Giada's screams were distant.

She knew this cold. The creeping of Erebos's cold, bony finger up her spine. He would wrap it around her neck and hold until the last breath left her.

*Giada, I'm sorry. I tried to protect you.*

Just as the world tunneled, the man who had been rearing back to deal the final blow on Elspeth crumpled. Worker's clothing was replaced with deep green, the practical coat Vivien wore. A new figure appeared as the sounds of battle faded.

An arm wrapped around Elspeth's shoulders, hoisting her upright. A familiar pair of dark eyes looked on worriedly.

"Giada?" Elspeth blinked, trying to make sense of what she saw.

"Take this." Giada thrust something to Elspeth's mouth, leaving her no choice but to swallow.



Warmth radiated through her. Her bones shifted, knitting. Wounds mended. Invisible hands put her broken body back together, slowly restoring consciousness and clarity and shaking Erebos's grasp. The world had never looked sharper. The lights were brighter and—

"Giada…" Elspeth lightly touched the young woman's cheek. "You're radiant."

Giada's lips parted slightly with surprise. "You see it too?" she whispered.

"I—" Elspeth didn't have a chance to ask if "it" was the hazy aura surrounding Giada.

"This way!" Kamiz shouted.

Jinnie grabbed Giada, hoisting her by the arm. "Don't help *them*, we have to flee."

"Wait." Elspeth was back on her feet, the Halo surging through her veins making her nimble and strong once more. "We're coming too."

"You think—" Jinnie's rage was cut short as she had to dodge an attack. She cursed loudly and glared between Elspeth and her fallen Cabaretti soldiers. "Fine. You're too good in a scrap. Keep up, and don't try anything funny."

Led by Kamiz, they escaped into a back alley, Riveteers and Maestros charging after them. Elspeth and Vivien took up the rear, holding off the attackers. Eventually no more followed.

"I think we lost them." Jinnie heaved a sigh of relief.

"Quick, in here." Kamiz opened a door and they all plunged into near-total darkness. "These are Obscura tunnels," she explained as they trudged upward, winding through New Capenna. "We use them to get around without being seen."



*"Raffine's Tower", by Sam White.*



"How do you know they're not compromised?" Vivien stole Elspeth's question.

"I don't," Kamiz answered honestly. "That's why we need to keep moving."

"Where are we moving toward?" Jinnie asked.

"Park Heights. The main Obscura stronghold, the Cloud Spire. If it's not safe there, we won't be safe anywhere."

### PARK HEIGHTS CATHEDRAL

As they continued to climb, Elspeth grabbed Giada's hand and gave it a light squeeze. *Thank you for saving me,* Elspeth mouthed, hoping Giada could see in the blue-tinted light that emitted from strips along the tops of the walls. The young woman's lips curled into a weary smile and she nodded. As Elspeth's fingers slipped from hers, Giada's attention remained on her own hand.

Giada slowly slid a bracelet off her wrist and glanced between Jinnie and Elspeth. After confirming Jinnie focus was ahead, she dropped the bracelet and pointed to it, mouthing two words, *Tracking spell.*

Elspeth ground the bracelet under her boot. Giada had been asking the same questions that plagued Elspeth about how Jinnie had found them. A swell of pride rushed through Elspeth. Giada was clever, and becoming

stronger and more confident by the moment. The move to rid herself of the bracelet was also all the confirmation that Elspeth needed to know that Giada still wanted to go with her. At the first opportunity, Elspeth would take her away again.

The passage came to a dead end.

Kamiz slid open a door and the familiar, earthy scents of Park Heights greeted them. Elspeth blinked into the afternoon light, already growing angry with a dusk that promised to be as bloody as New Capenna.

"Not much farther," Kamiz said, leading through carefully manicured hedges. "Right around here."

Vivien stopped short. Elspeth heard the sounds of footsteps and clanking of weapons, too.

"Wait, it's a tr—"

Giada and Jinnie had already rounded the corner of the hedges.

"What is the meaning of this?" Jinnie shouted.

Vivien readied her bow, turning to the Obscura enforcers circling them in from behind. Elspeth trusted her to watch her back as she raced ahead.

More Obscura enforcers were waiting in a clearing. Jinnie had already engaged with them as a wounded Kamiz attempted to crawl away from



Jinnie's feet. Jinnie had no doubt turned her rage on Kamiz immediately upon realizing her deception.

This had all been a setup. The Obscura were as compromised as everyone else was. The fight in the hideout had just been an excuse to separate them from the other Cabaretti and lure them into a trap. But she'd bet that Kamiz hadn't counted on Elspeth and Vivien still being around.

"Let's go." Elspeth grabbed Giada.



*"Daring Escape", by Ekaterina Burmak.*

"But Jinnie—"

"She made her choice." Elspeth practically scooped Giada up. "We have to leave or we're going to die."

Giada complied.

Vivien at their back, they raced through the park, branches reaching out, clawing at their faces and arms as they bolted in search of a reprieve. *Let there be one safe place in this city, one sanctuary,* Elspeth silently beseeched the cruel and uncaring gods. They emerged back onto a path that connected to a nearby cathedral suspended below angel statues.

"In there." Elspeth decided, dashing into the antechamber. Her steps slowed as they echoed into the nave.

The cathedral was a masterpiece. Countless angel statues lined the aisles leading up to the transept. Each had their hands upward, reaching toward the skylights above that highlighted them with a column of sunlight cutting through the relative shadow of the cathedral itself.

Elspeth blinked, several times. It wasn't a trick of the light. These statues gave off their own glow. Much like Giada. Like—

She stared at her palms. How had she not seen it before now? Dimmer than the rest… but Elspeth was also emitting the faintest golden haze.

"Do you hear it?" Giada whispered.



"I do."

The chorus resonated from deep within every statue. It reverberated around the choir and ambulatory to fill the whole cathedral with a solemn requiem. There were no words, just sound, wrought from turmoil and a pain so deep that it made Elspeth's eyes prickle. A high soprano soared over the rest, singing notes in a language of reckless hope that they all so desperately needed.

It was warmth and goodness. It was fulfilling yet longing. It was…



*"Giada, Font of Hope", by Eric Deschamps.*

"What is it?" Elspeth whispered.

"My family. I'm home," Giada said reverently, as if struck with unexpected clarity.

Suddenly, the word "home" held meaning. Elspeth shared a long stare with Giada who wore an enigmatic smile. She radiated like the angels of the cathedral. Her very form seemed to belong here, as though it were a piece finally returning to its spot.

"Home," Elspeth echoed. Home was purpose. It was defending those who needed her. Ajani had been right; home had never been about place. And for the first time, Elspeth felt like she had found somewhere she belonged—she had found purpose, someone and something to believe in and defend.

A low rumbling filled the cathedral and interrupted the song, followed by thunderous steps. Elspeth turned to see a hulking, horned man. Two wings of membrane, the color of old blood, stretched behind him.

The Adversary.

"Get behind me, Giada." Elspeth drew her sword.

"Did you really think you could escape me?"

"Good of you to show yourself, Ob Nixilis." Vivien didn't wait for a response. She fired the first arrow.



Ob Nixilis smashed his fist straight through the face of the ghostly wolf. It dissipated with a yelp. Vivien had two fresh arrows knocked when more enforcers lined the cathedral behind him.

"Take care of him, I'll deal with the rest. And be careful, he's *like us*!" Vivien shouted. *A Planeswalker,* she meant. Elspeth gripped her sword tighter.

"Run," Ob Nixilis growled as Vivien passed. His voice was sandpaper and fire. "Play with my agents until I'm ready to torment you." He kept his focus solely on Elspeth and Giada, wearing a cruel smile. Self-satis-



*"Demon's Due", by Slawomir Maniak.*

fied. As though the world was kindling for him to burn. "You thought you could best me? I'll show you what happens to people who dare contradict me—who even think of getting in the way of my power. Once the Font is in my possession, I'll end you both, one at a time, *slowly*."

Elspeth could feel the immense power radiating off of him. "Giada, if this goes sideways, run. Do it before I fall," Elspeth whispered. "I'll hold him off as long as I can, but you must get away while I can distract him."

Ob Nixilis moved with the speed of a much lither man. Elspeth had incorrectly assumed that all his bulging muscle would slow him down. But using his wings for balance, he could propel himself forward at alarming speeds.

"I'm going to enjoy destroying you!"

Elspeth focused on defensive attacks. She had to wear him down. He had her beat on strength and speed and her only shot was using those against him.

Whenever she saw an opening, she jabbed or slashed. But she landed nothing more than glancing blows. Enough to encumber and frustrate. But not enough to slow or stop. The sword was too large for her and unruly to wield. She had to wait for the right opening to present itself.



Reaching his tolerance for her diversions, Ob Nixilis unleashed a burst of power. It shot out from him, sending Elspeth flying back. Her head cracked against the stone and the world spun. Nausea shot up from her stomach.

"Giada," Elspeth wheezed. She tipped her head back, but it only made more stars pop into her vision. "Run."

"No, there is nowhere for me to run to." Giada hovered; her form was growing hazy, glowing even brighter than before.

Ob Nixilis's rumbling footsteps drew closer. His rough laughter rattled Elspeth's bones. "First, you. Then the Font. Then the other Planeswalker… And then nothing will stop me."

"Run," Elspeth pleaded, eyes burning. She had sworn she would protect Giada. She had found duty and purpose only to be met with more failure.

"Don't fear for me any longer, Elspeth. There is more for me out there—I am going to be with my family now." Giada rounded to Elspeth's side, kneeling. She was more of an outline of shimmering magic now than a physical being.

*Family…* it was something Elspeth once knew through Ajani, Daxos… Giada's words ignited something deep within her. A flickering candle of hope, no brighter than the faint glow she'd seen covering her earlier. Ob Nixilis's footsteps stopped. "What do you think you're doing?"

Giada's focus remained solely on Elspeth. "Thank you, for everything. I found my answers. Let me protect you now." She tipped her chin up and looked just like the rest of the sculpted angels. "I'm ready," she whispered to unseen ears.

Light filled the room. It shot out in every direction from Giada's body, the force of the blast strong enough to throw Ob Nixilis away. Elspeth, however, was unaffected. She looked on in awe as Giada was transformed into the radiant magic of Halo.



*"Soul of Emancipation", by Eric Deschamps.*



Elspeth breathed it in, allowing it to coat her flesh like armor and sink into her bones. The singing returned, a full chorus in which every part was in perfect harmony. It reached a true crescendo of joy, as if to overwrite the screams of the Cabaretti celebration that had dared to take the same name.

Slowly, as the swirling lights began to fade, Elspeth sat up. Ob Nixilis groaned, still prone. Vivien and the men outside were also on their backs. Elspeth wondered if Giada's transformation had stunned all of New Capenna.

*Elspeth,* Giada's voice whispered from a great distance, barely audible over the fading chorus. She was fading, but she wasn't alone. Giada was framed by the shining outlines of others like her. *End this, protect New Capenna. You have the weapon you need. It's been at your side all along, following you, waiting until you are ready.*

*I'm not strong enough.*

*You are, Giada insisted. Your failures do not define you. Don't give up now, not when you're so close to everything you've ever wanted. Fight!*

Elspeth heard Ajani in the Giada's words. Her friend still spoke to her, across time and place. Her eyes fluttered closed and she sighed softly.

*Home was duty.*

*Family was those she chose to defend.*

*She'd always had everything she ever needed.*

Elspeth opened her eyes and stood. In one fluid motion she hoisted the sword at her side. The weapon was no longer a clunky broadsword. It had been transformed into a narrower weapon, one far more suited in length and weight for her frame. The pommel wasn't a practical steel guard, but an orb of Halo, shining with colors that shifted so often, it was every color at once.



*"Luxior, Giada's Gift", by Volkan Baga.*



The Halo seeped into the blade, running up tracks in the fuller. From middle to edges, the weapon glowed with the same faint light as Giada. Elspeth brought the hilt to her nose, blade upright, knowing that somehow, somewhere, Giada watched the salute and could finish her metamorphosis now that Elspeth would carry on her vow.

Elspeth would defend New Capenna.

She lunged forward, wielding her new sword with both hands. Ob Nixilis barely had time to roll away from her thrust. As he dodged, he raised up a hand, pointing at her. She could feel the magic collecting in the air and narrowly avoided his shot.

Fueled by Halo and purpose, wielding the blade gifted by Giada, Elspeth could go toe-to-toe with the mighty Adversary. Her blows were no longer clumsy and glancing, but purposeful and skilled.

She felt like her old self. *No.* These weren't the movements of the woman she once was. These were the movements of someone stronger, better. Who she had been meant little when compared to who she would become.

Ob Nixilis grew increasingly frustrated every time she landed a strike on him. He roared, dodged back, and tried to raise his hand for one more attack. Elspeth didn't allow it. She closed the gap, jabbing straight for his chin.

At the last second, he attempted to get out of the way, but he wasn't fast enough. Steel met flesh and she grazed off the side of his neck. Ob Nixilis gasped, though it only made the wound worse. Blood flowed from between his fingers as he applied futile compression. Elspeth withdrew, determined to slash again. She'd cut through his fingers if that's what it took to finish the job.

But Ob Nixilis staggered backward. The air wavered, distorting the world around him. It folded in on itself, collapsing Ob Nixilis's form beyond the realm of perception. In a blink, he was gone, planeswalked away.

Elspeth stared at the now-empty spot where Ob Nixilis once stood. Several curses were about to escape her lips when a groan jolted her back to reality. *Vivien!* Elspeth raced over to the entry, helping her friend up. Vivien massaged her head.

"What happened?"

"Giada saved us all. But Ob Nixilis got away. This is far from over."

Elspeth and Vivien walked up the steps of the museum. Unsurprisingly, the ash had already been cleaned. But there were still pockmarks in the marble of the main hall. Maestros were hard at work putting their museum back together.

"I've been expecting you." Anhelo crossed over from where he had been ordering around a few younger members of the now much smaller family.

"Expecting me?" Elspeth asked, hand resting lightly on the pommel of the Halo sword looped through her belt. She didn't come here for a fight. But she wasn't about to take no for an answer when it came to finally getting access to Xander's archives.

"Yes. I found this stitched in my coat on the night of the Crescendo. As soon as I read it, I came straight back, but I was already too late… though it spared me from the bloodbath in the Vantoleone." Anhelo fished out a letter from his pocket. It bore Xander's seal. Elspeth unfolded it, reading its contents:

*Anhelo,*

*I thank you for your years of obedient service. You are as good a man as you are an assassin. But, my friend, I fear this will be where we part.*



*The Maestros are now in your hands and I trust that after the long night ahead you will help them usher in a new era. Everything that I have collected over the years should serve you well. Make our family your own as you see fit. It was well past time for the guiding vision of a younger leader.*

*Finally, should she survive the night ahead, which I have little doubt she will, Elspeth will come seeking my Archives. Give her access and try not to ask too many questions.*

*For one last time,*

*Yours,*

*Xander*

"He knew I would come." Elspeth scanned the letter twice more before handing it back to Anhelo.

"Xander always knew what would happen in New Capenna, often before any of the rest of us." Anhelo folded his hands at the small of his back. "This way."

She followed Anhelo through the museum and up to Xander's office. He pulled back a curtain in the far corner of the room to expose a door. Unlocking it, he motioned for Vivien and Elspeth to enter.

"Anything in Xander's archives is yours. Come whenever you please." Anhelo left them.

They spent the day searching and scouring. No page was left unturned. Anhelo was kind enough to bring them lunch… and dinner, as twilight descended on the city.

Histories of Capenna hidden in Xander's office spelled out the story: In the distant past, the Phyrexians made an attempt on this world. The angels tried to stop the invasion, but the threat was too great for them to face alone. In desperation, they formed an alliance with the Demon Lords. In the face of the Phyrexians, Capenna's own rivalries were petty; however, those rivalries would not be forgotten. The demons ultimately betrayed the angels, trapping them in a kind of stasis from which they could convert the angels' bodies into Halo, an essence that—as Xander had told her—could be taken to help protect the city. It was messy, but it worked. The Demon Lords used Halo to defeat the Phyrexians and then disappeared themselves.

Halo had been the key. If it held the Phyrexians at bay here… this could that be the answer Ajani sought, even if the supply of Halo was dwindling. Luckily, among the archives was a small cache of Halo that Xander was no doubt saving for a rainy day. This seemed as rainy as things could be. Elspeth would take it and all the information back to Ajani and Gatewatch.

Elspeth and Vivien stood side by side, staring out the massive window in the same spot Xander had. They hadn't said a word for hours. The silence was filled with revelations and knowledge.



"New Capenna will continue to fight over Halo," Elspeth said finally. "The supply is almost used up and if it runs dry they'll tear themselves apart." Her mind briefly wandered to Giada and the shining figures the young woman had departed with. Would the angles return to New Capenna to usher in a new age if the city were in dire need? Or had they all gone on to something greater?

"There's more to this world than one city. If New Capenna's fate is to destroy itself, then nature will reclaim it. Life will persist on this plane." Vivien's words weren't cold, but thoughtful. Perhaps even intended to be reassuring that *something* would thrive long after the fall of the city.

"Even still, I can't turn my back on them."

"You will never be able to make them safe if you stay. The Phyrexians are now a threat to everyone."

"I know," Elspeth said.

"But now we can fight them," Vivien said, with a nod to Elspeth's sword and then to the cache of Xander's hidden Halo. "And if Urabrask is to be believed…"

"What did he tell you?"

Vivien folded her arms. "Revolution." She furrowed her brow in intense thought. "On New Phyrexia. It might give us the window we need to stop them."

*To stop her.* The porcelain rictus of the Grand Cenobite—her former prison and the Phyrexian capital—loomed large in Elspeth's memory. Walking away from New Capenna meant heading once more into that metallic hell. *Koth, Melira, Karn...* Going back meant facing her nightmares and confronting her time there as a girl. It meant another battle, another war.

Was she strong enough? Did she have a choice? Did anyone? All she wanted to do was rest, but how could she step away from battle now? She had to get back to Dominaria and tell Ajani all she'd learned, show him the Halo, and ready herself.

*There was too much to be done.* Elspeth nodded, determination fueling her as hot as the Halo swirling in the sword at her hip. If she had purpose and people to defend, she would find her home along the way. That was the best path forward for her.

"We should go," Elspeth declared.

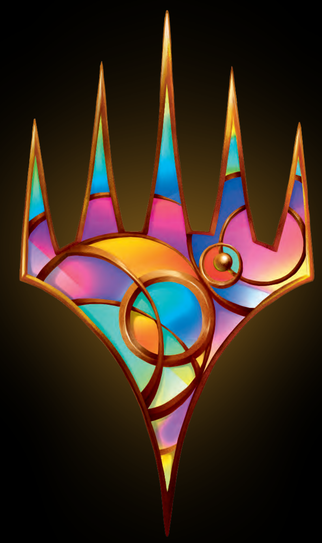
"Where to?"

Elspeth was pleased it seemed like Vivien was ready to continue this journey with her. If war was coming, she could use more powerful allies.

"Dominaria." Elspeth turned away from the city skyline of New Capenna. "Time to meet some old friends."



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# DOMINARIA UNITED

By Langley Hyde

# EPISODE I
# Echoes In The Dark

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ALONE IN THE CAVES OF KOILOS, KARN SEARCHES FOR A WAY TO ACTIVATE THE SYLEX—HIS ULTIMATE WEAPON AGAINST NEW PHYREXIA. HE DISCOVERS, TO HIS HORROR, THAT THE ENEMY IS CLOSER THAN HE POSSIBLY IMAGINED.

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*"Karn, Living Legacy", by Chris Rahn.*

Even from three caverns away, the shriek of breaking metal echoed against the stone. Yet another broken excavator. If Karn had been an organic being, he would have sighed. Instead he only paused and listened to the excavator's lingering rattles. He pitied his machines: no single setting could accommodate the eccentric geology of the Caves of Koilos, where olivine rock was as likely to back into sandstone as cinnabar, but he had no alternative. Here he'd find the secret to operating the Sylex.

And he'd find it before any Phyrexian agent could.

Condensation beaded on his body, the droplets joining to slide down his metal plating. No one seemed to believe him, but he knew the truth. The Phyrexians were here, on Dominaria. He could feel it, like he could feel the stone and the interplanar technology riddling its layers.

He turned sideways to squeeze through a narrow passage. The basalt grated against his chest but gave way without scratching him. He ducked under translucent stalagmites into a low cave. Clear selenite coated the bones of Thran prisoners and fragmented Thran technologies, their gold traceries distorted.

Karn located the failed excavator to the rear of the cave.

The poor excavator steamed, as if vexed with its unmanageable job, and its overheated metal housing ticked with a soft *tink-tink-tink* as it cooled. Karn wove between the stalactites and water pools, careful not to



break any of the delicate violet mineral deposits or to disturb the freshwater anemones and tiny blind fish, bleached by a life that had, until now, passed in darkness.

Karn placed his hand on the excavator. "Shall I fix you, then? Yes?"

Steam sighed from the overheated machine. At his gesture, screws unwound themselves along their threading. He set them aside and removed the housing. A stripped-out gear greeted him. He removed it and set to generating a replacement. His fingers tingled with magic, its charge pulling together to generate something from nothing. Metal materialized, layer upon layer, to create a duplicate part.

He liked working in the caves' silence. In the sun's absence only the water's metronome drip measured out his days. He was alone here; other Planeswalkers didn't like the interplanar distortion that rubbed at their senses in the Caves of Koilos. Karn didn't either, but he appreciated the isolation it gave him. He didn't have to answer questions. Or worry about whether the Phyrexians had gotten to someone. Compleated them. He could seek the key to operating the Sylex in solitude. He would win the fight alone.

"What fight?" Jhoira had placed her hands on her hips in exasperation. "Karn, the Phyrexians were defeated centuries ago, and these new ones you told me about are trapped on their plane."

"They're here," Karn had told her. "Defeating the Phyrexians in combat means nothing. They aren't an army. They're hate embodied. They promise Dominaria's destruction."

Her voice had softened. "Just because Venser…"

Karn didn't want to think about Venser. He slipped the gear onto its shaft and tightened it down. He replaced the housing, sliding it into place, and then threaded in each screw. Small pleasures. He patted the excavator and smiled. "That's better, isn't it?"

He knew it wasn't alive, wasn't responding to him, but it almost felt like it was as he flipped a lever and watched the excavator move forward and begin digging into the cave wall. The stone shuddered. Fine white dust plumed away from the excavator's planed shovel-limbs. If organic beings had been present, Karn would have had to worry about using water to damp down the dust. Their lungs were so fragile.

Better that he was alone, wasn't it? No one held him back, eating and sleeping hours away. No one delayed his progress with chitchat.

The pulverized rock turned violet, then the excavator's rumble changed to a whine as it hit open air.  The excavator stepped back and Karn peered into the cavern it had opened.



The rock had been thin as an eggshell but extremely hard. On other side, the cavern's interior was coated in opal. The glow from his eyes caught on the iridescent flecks, suffusing the cavern with an amber glimmer. The dust-coated workshop looked like it came from Urza's mortal lifetime, or even prior, when magic's theories and practices were less well-known and technology propelled Dominaria's progress forward. Intricate glass tubing, beakers of varying sizes, defunct burners, powdery remnants of ancient chemicals, wire cutters and rollers for clay, buckets coated with desiccated glazes, gears and cogs—even a small vented forge, tongs placed casually to one side as if its smith, interrupted, had walked away from a task undone. In one corner, shackles: a reminder that the Caves of Koilos once housed the ugliness of the Thran before it transformed into Phyrexia.

This workshop had been some artificer's sanctuary—and some prisoner's nightmare. Karn recognized a setup meant to exploit sentient beings for experimentation when he saw one. He'd seen too many such scenes when he'd been newly formed.

"How did all this survive so intact?" If only he could share this sight with someone—

He really had to stop talking to himself.

Karn stepped into the cavern as lightly as his heavy body permitted. What if a stray vibration caused these delicate objects to shatter, destroying data?

The books, arranged on a single long shelf with jewel-covered spines, tempted him with their knowledge, but he dared not take one down. The paper would probably crumble into dust should he touch it. He peeked into the beakers, tinted with dried-out fluids, and then examined the forge's ashes. Nothing. He examined the pottery worktop and saw it: a diagram of the Sylex painted on parchment, a coppery bowl with handles and small black figures marching around its base. A gray slab of clay sat next to the diagram, etched with symbols duplicating those depicted in the diagram's faded paint. Some were in Thran; some in the arcing curves of an unrecognizable script that resembled some symbols on the Sylex. The clay was damaged, partially illegible, and severed wires lay beside it. What had happened here?

"I must compare this to the Sylex."

At the faint vibration of his words, the books collapsed into dust. Karn winced.

He gathered the unfired clay tablet into his hands—careful, careful—and eased out from the ancient workshop.



Karn had sited his basecamp some distance from the excavators, where the caves had greater stability. Each softly lit tent sheltered his equipment from the steady drip of water. Karn let their brightness guide his steps, the hollow cavern booming with his footfalls.

With the tents lit from within, coming back to camp almost felt like coming home. Karn ducked into the largest tent, stepping around the large, golden Thran artifact he'd left in front of the entrance. Inside, he shimmied past a broken piece of metal he had collected days ago, intending to reshape it back to usefulness. He stepped over a pile of powerstone shards and sat at his work desk; it, like the rest of his tent, was too cluttered—he had no space for his newest find. Atop the papers and small artifacts, he saw Jhoira's letters, scattered, opened but unanswered. Karn, it's been months, one letter began. *Don't you think you should examine why you're doing this?* another letter ended. *Mirrodin wasn't your fault,* she wrote in another. *Please come back. Venser would have…*

Karn shifted the artifact onto one palm and used the other hand to shove Jhoira's letters to one side. He slid the artifact onto the worktop, then ducked under the table. He'd concealed the Sylex in a small titanium chest, its lock only accessible to someone like him, someone who both knew the order in which the tumblers and pins needed to be lifted and could manipulate inorganic materials. His lock had no key.



*"Inscribed Tablet", by Jarel Threat.*

He placed his hand on the chest, focused, and felt the tumblers move. The lid popped open. He removed the Sylex. Even his specialized senses could not identify its copper-like material. Normally he could reveal any inorganic object's mystery with a touch; not so the Sylex. It made his palms itch with its strangeness. A Thran artifact, most said—but he had his doubts. It was Karn's belief that this device came from farther fields than simply the past.



He lifted its wide goblet body onto his desk. Its inky characters seemed to move under his worktop's light, transforming from Thran to Fallaji to Sumifan. The vessel's wide, bowl-like mouth seemed to call to be filled—with, according to the Sumifan, the memories of the land. He'd been reluctant to test it without confirmation on how to use it.

The Sylex sent a jolt through him. Karn flinched and withdrew his hand, cradling it against his body.

Once, when he'd been new, he'd reached out and touched the fire blazing in Urza's hearth. He'd dropped the cherry-red coal, shocked by the sensation, then examined his hand for damage. He'd found none. He'd looked up to see Urza watching him with glittering eyes. Urza hadn't tried to stop him, yet he'd known this would hurt Karn. *Why did you give me intelligence if you do not value my personhood?* Karn had felt ashamed the moment he'd asked the question, and yes, Urza had chuckled. *You're more valuable to me if you can react intelligently.* Karn had started at his aching, undamaged hand. *Then why give me pain?* Urza had smiled and stroked his white beard. Karn had later learned how to recognize that expression as one Urza made when he thought he was being particularly clever. *People are more reluctant to damage something if it causes that thing pain.*

But that was only true of some people, wasn't it?

Karn glanced at Jhoira's unanswered letters. He did not dare involve Jhoira or the other Planeswalkers, lest he lose them to the Phyrexians like he'd lost Venser. Even after Memnarch renamed it, Karn still thought of that world by its first name: Argentum. It had been Argentum to him when he'd created it and its smallest wonders. How beautiful it had been, a world glimmering with mathematical precision.

The Phyrexians had taken it from him. His world, his children. Memnarch, his creation.

And it was all his fault.

He grabbed a rag from a nearby pile to wipe the condensation from his body—he didn't want to drip on his new, unfired find—and dropped the rag back into the heap. He bent to study the Sylex, comparing its symbols to those on the clay tablet. The pattern changed right where the clay tablet's edge seemed rougher. Broken. Had he forgotten a piece?

He needed to go back for it. Now. Since he'd opened the cavern to the caves' moisture, the artifacts in it would degrade.

Just then, the death rattle of another excavator echoed through the caverns. Karn wished he could sigh. But, as it was, he locked away the Sylex and his most recent find. He'd repair the excavator—it was located near the ancient workshop anyway—and then he'd look for the missing piece.

...



Oily smoke oozed up from the excavator's housing. It seemed to have hit a hard mineral deposit, stressing the mechanisms behind the cutting tools. Karn patted it. "More than you could cope with?"

The machine released a gout of smoke.

"I know the feeling," Karn replied.

Before getting started, he peered around the tunnel's edge. The nearby workshop, despite the excavator's rumblings, seemed intact. Good. The excavator could continue its work without risking damage to those artifacts, then. After he repaired it, he would search the workshop for the missing piece to the clay tablet.

He pulled the machine away and reached into the wall where it was digging.

He scooped out something… liquid. Oily black slop dripped down his fingers, spattering the ground. Could it be…?

Karn reached with his special senses into the material. For him—he had tried to explain it to Jhoira once—this ability was akin to tasting, if tasting were to provide information beyond flavor. He felt nothing. As if this substance was organic.

How had the cables been embedded into stone? It looked almost like they'd woven themselves into it, like worms through an apple that was otherwise undisturbed.

He had been right: the oil was Phyrexian. He checked again—could these fibers be ancient remnants? "No, no," he murmured. "They look recent. Fresh."

Karn reached into the bore hole and grabbed one of the fibers. It writhed under his fingers, resistant, and released small spider-like clamps from its body to grip the stone. The cable was alive. He frowned. It lashed his fingertips as if trying to wriggle free from his grip. He tugged, hard, and tore it free from its tunneled cavity.

Black oil spattered across his torso from its root. The other cables contracted within the wall—and the ceiling to the ancient workshop thundered to the ground. The tunnel behind Karn crumpled, the passage to his basecamp gone.

He had lost his findings.

He would never locate the shard of the unfired tablet. He would never slot it in and see what it revealed. He would never fully investigate the chamber and determine if it housed other secrets about the Sylex's creation. This recent development had seen to that. Now he had a more ur-



gent problem, one he needed to prioritize over archeological catastrophe: the Phyrexians were on Dominaria. Here, now.

He could try to excavate the workshop. He could dig out the passage and return to his basecamp. He could reach out to the others, but seeking help took time and, Karn knew, put others at risk. If he had learned anything during his long life, it was this: a single moment of inattention, of neglect, could leave an entire world vulnerable to the Phyrexians. The Phyrexians were contained within the caves for now, and he with them. Good. He would not let Dominaria fall like Mirrodin once fell. He'd stop the Phyrexians. If he could not do that, he would obtain proof enough that he could recruit reinforcements. Proof enough that Jhoira, and his fellow Planeswalkers, would believe him.

*Karn,* Jhoira would say, *you were right all along.*

...

Karn had only one direction he could go: forward. He stepped into the open Phyrexian tunnel. The walls looked organic, winding through the stone like veins through a body.

He followed the tunnel until it opened into a junction. Here the walls had been carved into a frieze. Unlike the materials he had seen in the workshop and embedded behind translucent stone, these cuts seemed

crisp and new. It had the vaulted quality Karn associated with religious practices, such as the stained-glass murals in Serra's temples.

In the frieze, a Phyrexian demon grasped a young human woman. The demon's elongated skull, bared teeth, and small eyes were depicted with loving detail. Each node of machinery and every exposed muscle fiber was polished until it gleamed. Small diamonds had been inset as highlights, so that the demon seemed to move and glitter under Karn's gaze. In contrast, the human's profile, cut into the stone, was rough, her features drawn down into torment, revulsion, and fear. She held hands with another figure, whose visage had been carved, then intentionally defaced.

A whisper of cloth brushing stone drew Karn's attention. He turned, his hand still pressed to the mural.

Humans always seemed so little to Karn. Only the tallest neared his height; all others were petite compared to him. These two—a man and a woman—were both small. The woman, her pale skin starved for sunlight and her brown hair ragged, had replaced her jaw with a hinged mechanism, small blades installed alongside her natural teeth. Where flesh joined metal, her scabs wept a sick, yellowish fluid. Her older companion, a white man with graying brittle blond hair, must have incorporated his technology more artfully: his white shirt lay open to expose the artificial heart beating between his ribs, the portal into his body protected with a glassy material. He had also added extra digits to his hands.






*"The Cruelty of Gix", by Volkan Baga.*

Both held chisels and large mallets. The sculptors, then. Acolytes from the Society of Mishra if their robes told him the truth. The female looked at Karn, then to his hand resting on the frieze, and shrieked in outrage. She launched herself forward. Her male companion followed her a second later.

She took a swing at his torso with the hammer. Karn seized her arm with one hand, and she drove her chisel toward the intricate, mobile plates along his abdomen. He grabbed her other arm. She grunted, straining against him. Her companion ran at Karn, raising his hammer over his shoulder. Karn swung the woman into her companion, slamming both into the wall. They fell in a tangle of limbs—nothing broken, just stunned—to the ground.

Karn bent over them and arranged their limbs. He held out his hands and generated restraints so that they could not attack him again. Iron particles buzzed at his fingertips, drawn from the aether. He called forth the metal in layers, building the restraints into bands on their arms and legs. He did not generate keyholes or a key, for he had no need to. The metal bands were solid.

The man moaned. The woman had enough fury in her to spit at Karn. The gob landed near his foot. They were so tiny. His strength, his reflexes, the facts of his body seemed an unfair advantage. Karn had torn through so many such creatures at Urza's request, walking through rank



upon rank of soldiers like a lead weight through wet paper. He could almost feel it now: the resistance, then give, of those bodies; the heat of their blood trickling into his joints. The long hours he had spent while Urza slept cleaning his body with small wire brushes, scraping off the dried gore, digging out the clots from behind his knees. He had never felt clean enough.

"You are not Phyrexian," Karn said, "yet you are here, and if I am not mistaken, in service to them. What do you hope to accomplish?"

"You—you empty, fleshless husk. You desecrate our holy work with your touch." The female acolyte's rage dulled to a glittering self-satisfaction. "Others will respond to the barrier being broken. Gix's blessings upon them—they will come. They will come."

Ah yes, the network of wires in the walls. When he had broken through them, he had likely triggered an alarm. Perhaps these first acolytes had responded as if some animal or natural event had severed the cables, but when these two did not report back the others would not make such a mistake. Karn reached toward the female's face and, with a twist of his fingers, generated a metal gag. The only reason she hadn't shouted for help—sounds would carry in these caverns—was that it hadn't yet occurred to her.

She glared at him, making muffled noises that sounded like curses.

He leaned over the male acolyte. “What are you doing here?”

The male blinked at Karn. His pupils had dilated to different sizes. He was concussed. His speech, as a result, slurred. “Karn. I know you. It’s good that you came.”

Karn frowned.

“The Whispering One has a plan for you.” The acolyte beamed. “She grows stronger daily, and you will serve her. Sheoldred welcomes you! It’s your destiny, Karn, to create for us. To help us. To become one of us.”

Karn generated another gag so that this one, when he regained his senses, could not call for help. The acolyte accepted the gag—almost as if he appreciated it—with a beatific smile.

Karn stepped away.

How had Sheoldred survived crossing between planes? A question he would ponder later: for now, he had to find her, to end the Phyrexian invasion before it started. And he could do that alone. Better that he did, for he could not be subverted. Venser’s spark saved him from that.

Karn left the acolytes bound and gagged, and plunged deeper into the cave network. The damp in these passages did not feel like the air around his camp, but rather warm as breath. Hot moist air condensed on his cold



body, trickling down in rivulets like sweat. Faint screams reverberated through the air.

The tunnel opened into a vast cavern, which echoed with the cacophony of human misery. On the other side of the crevasse was the Phyrexian staging ground, located on a broad flat area of the cavern floor. Ant-like workers scrambled across the rope bridges strung over the crevasse, ferrying meaty gobs, bloody cables, and chunks of flesh over to humans being compleated on surgical tables. On the opposite wall of the cavern, a Phyrexian portal ship cut through the darkness like an immense scythe. Coils hung from this structure. The twitching loops’ membranous purple gleam reminded Karn of intestines.

Sheoldred hung suspended in this morass. She was still. Tubes fed reddish and milky substances into her black segmented body. The mandibles that extended down from her thorax lay open, relaxed. Her humanoid torso, welded to the thorax’s top, lay nested in a thick network of writhing inky lines. A horned mask obscured her face. Beneath her, worshippers clung together and raised their voices in an ecstatic paean.

The defunct Phyrexian portal ship and Sheoldred’s sleeping form dominated the cavern. Acolytes in the gray robes of the Society of Mishra attended surgical machines that converted struggling people into Phyrexian abominations. Compleated monstrosities dotted the cavern’s floor like grotesque artworks, skittering on too many limbs. More acolytes stacked



*“Sheoldred’s Restoration”, by Igor Kieryluk.*

weapons beside a Phyrexian sky ship. Teams of splicers scaled a dragon engine to repair it, so small that their welding torches seemed like white stars against the engine’s metal skeleton.

He’d found the staging ground of the Phyrexian invasion.

A single figure attended Sheoldred: a young woman with platinum brown skin and dark umber curls who wore the cloak of the Tolarian academy. When she turned, Karn saw the red dot from a mechanical eye.



Below, an acolyte hurried forward and offered up gobbets of flesh. The young woman sorted through them, twisting some into the morass that supported Sheoldred. Karn traced the line of acolytes carrying materials from the immense monstrosity to Sheoldred and her helper. She was mining the monstrosity to repair Sheoldred’s damaged biological components.

If the other Planeswalkers could see this now, they’d know that Karn’s fears were true. Jhoira would say—

No. It didn’t matter what Jhoira would say. Karn faced this threat alone. He needed to alert the others, yes, but neither could he leave this staging ground intact. He had to destroy the Phyrexians before they could defend themselves.

His course of action decided, Karn held out his hand, palm up. He raised his other hand above it. He visualized the incendiary device he planned to generate from the inside out. He could see its every component, its chemicals, laid out like a dimensional blueprint. His fingertips buzzed with the magic of his creation. The layers of material accumulated in midair. It was no Sylex, but it would end Sheoldred.

A klaxon filled the cavern with its high-pitched holler.

Karn located its source as acolytes, worshippers, and Phyrexian agents paused in their work: the female acolyte who’d attacked him was blow-

ing a horn. Either she'd been discovered and freed, or she'd freed herself: the drawback to leaving his attackers alive.

The shrill sound prompted action. Acolytes loaded weapons into the sky ships. Phyrexian surgeons loaded their bloodied operating tables into sky ships. Others boarded the sky ships, evacuating. Compleated Phyrexian monstrosities shuddered to life, metal fibers snaking out from their bodies. Others slumped to the floor. Claw-like limbs exploded from their abdomens and their gaping mouths opened blindly, like reptiles scenting for prey.

A red beam dotted Karn's chest.

Karn dropped flat to the rock just as a bolt of electricity flew overhead. He pressed his palms to the ground, lifting himself high enough to crawl forward. At the cliff's edge, he peered to the cavern's floor, trying to locate the blast's origin.

The Tolarian who aided Sheoldred leveled a glaive at him. She had replaced her eye with a miniaturized ray cannon, and its red beam hit Karn. Karn rolled to the side. A crackle exploded the rock beside him. Smoke wisped up from where he'd once lain.

Compleated Phyrexians swarmed toward him, and the Tolarian smiled. She placed a hand on Sheoldred's limp claw. Sheoldred remained limp





*"Rona, Sheoldred's Faithful", by Ryan Alexander Lee.*

and inert—as if she were under sedation while the young woman worked to restore her—and vulnerable.

And Karn still held his incendiary device.

The nearest bridge over to Sheoldred was close but narrow. Twelve ecstatic worshippers and the young woman with the glaive blocked his access to the Praetor. But Sheoldred seemed some distance from the Phyrexians and Tolarian acolytes located on the cavern floor. If Karn was

quick, he would not have to battle through all Sheoldred's followers to attack her: just the twelve worshippers, the Tolarian making it thirteen.

Karn pushed himself to his feet and charged down the narrow stone bridge. Sheoldred's worshippers ceased their paean and launched themselves toward him. Two reached the bridge. Karn shouldered them aside into crevasse's abyss.

The other worshippers crowded themselves into a blockade. Two had leveled spears at him, which would have kept him at bay had he been a creature with flesh. Puncturing weapons annoyed him only if the shafts or blades became trapped in his joints and inhibited his range of motion. Similarly, the two young men with rotating saws did not give him pause: those blades would glance from his body. No, Karn focused on the worshippers who wielded the pistol chisels and welding torches.

It all came back to him so easily. He felt numb, efficient. As Urza made him. Karn stopped an inch away from the spearpoints. The worshippers shifted, uneasy. Karn took one step forward, seized a spear, and lifted. A worshipper, still clinging to his weapon, gaped and dangled. Karn swung him into foes, sweeping several off the bridge and breaking up their blockade. Then he tossed the spear-wielder into the crevasse's depths, the man's screams fading as he fell.



The other spear-wielder, an older woman, jammed her spearpoint into a gap in his torso. Although he held an incendiary device, he cracked the spear shaft by hammering his fist down, breaking it off inside him. He'd deal with that later. He grabbed the broken shaft end, which she still held, and used it to swing her aside. She fell and crumpled.

Only six combatants remained.

The wielder of a rotating saw swung their buzzing instrument at Karn's head. Karn stepped back to evade. Before the saw could come around again, he stepped within the wielder's range and removed the tool from the man's fingers. The man tried to resist, but Karn had overwhelming strength on his side. Prying away the man's grip was disturbingly easy. Karn lifted him and tossed him into two more worshippers. The force crunched all three to the floor in a sickening confusion of broken limbs.

A piston chisel wielder rushed him from the side. The chisel thunked into Karn, then skidded down his arm, throwing its user off balance. Karn punched him. The man went flying. The remaining two worshippers fled; their faith was not so great in the face of such bodily harm. All these humans, even with the Phyrexian alterations, were no sturdier to him than butterflies. Karn wished it were not so easy.

He strode to Sheoldred. She hung, limp within her cradle but no longer quiescent. Her segmented limbs twitched like an arachnid's as she

emerged into consciousness. Her human torso atop her thorax shivered. Her long fingers reached downward to the young woman in the Tolarian robes. But she did not seem aware—not yet.

"Karn." The Tolarian spoke with contempt. "I've heard a lot about you."

"How so?"

Her gaze flicked to Sheoldred's inert form, then returned to him. "You aren't as impressive as I've been led to believe."

Karn walked toward Sheoldred, the incendiary device in his hand.

"Who are you?" Karn asked the Tolarian. "Why would you bring this here?"

"Rona. And this," she gestured to Sheoldred, "is Dominaria's salvation."

Rona positioned herself between Karn and Sheoldred, glaive held easy and at an angle in her palms. Rona's flesh eye narrowed while her mechanical socket focused its laser onto Karn's torso. She flexed her hands around her glaive. Its blade brightened, crackling with blue electricity. She smiled.

"I do not wish to fight you," Karn told her.

"Too bad."

Rona leveled her glaive at him and electricity burst from her blade.



The electricity danced across his body, sparking. Karn grimaced at the pain but pushed through it, walking toward her as more waves rippled from its blade, pouring over him. Karn paused, dazed, and tried to shake off the agony as Rona continued to attack. She swung the glaive down, lodging it into his shoulder. Karn twisted, pulling it from her grip, and removed it from his body. He threw it aside. While he was occupied, Rona unsheathed a dagger and jammed it into one of his abdominal seams. She dug it between the plates that allowed him to flex, as if searching for organs. Karn winced.

Karn gripped her head in one of his hands. He pressed his thumb into the mechanical eye and shattered the ray's lens. Rona shrieked and kicked. Karn tossed her into the wall. Bones crunched. She slammed into it, then fell to the ground. She curled, her hands around her head, her leg at an angle unnatural to human beings. Oil and blood oozed from the broken mechanical parts in her eye socket. She glared up at him from between her fingers, her lips drawn into a rictus.

"Why don't you kill me?" Rona taunted him. "Finish me off."

"I am not a weapon."

Karn neared Sheoldred, holding his incendiary device. Although her humanoid part was the size of an ordinary woman, she attached to a scorpion-like body easily three times his size. In contrast to that well-crafted

beauty, the organic materials grafted into her human torso seemed crude, bloody. Rona had tried her best to replace the organic parts that had burned away in the Blind Eternities during Sheoldred's transit between worlds, but its patchwork nature showed.

He would tear her to pieces. He would crush her while she was still weak. He would do anything—*anything*—to stop Sheoldred from Phyrexianizing this world. Karn reached up and seized Sheoldred's torso, determined to finish this. He would tuck this device between the vulnerable plates of her body and destroy her.

At his touch Sheoldred stirred. Her helmeted head craned down toward him. He could *feel* her with the same senses he used to determine the elemental composition of a compound. Her inorganic components stretched out before him like the pages in a book. Her biological parts lay like dark tumors nested within the metal's luminescent glory. He could read her thoughts—some of them.

*Welcome, Father,* Sheoldred whispered into his mind, one mechanical being to another. *What plans I have for you.*

Karn recoiled from her slimy whisper, stepping back. And he knew what she had done.

Phyrexian sleeper agents lurked in every land in Dominaria, these unknowing spies peppered throughout every government, throughout the



military, throughout common people. He saw a brewer dumping hops into a vat. A spy. He saw a scribe sitting at a desk, her hand poised over a letter. He saw an adolescent playing chase his cousins, pretending to be a monster when he was one, Phyrexian armature ready to explode from his back. Phyrexian agents were people's lovers, comrades, colleagues at work. They were everywhere. They could be anyone.

*Welcome,* her whisper echoed within him. *Welcome.*

Karn reached between the plates on her thorax and deposited the incendiary device inside her body. He lifted his thumb to flip the switch that would allow the two chemicals within it to flow into each other and combust.

But his hand did not move. His joints had locked. He attempted to look down to examine himself but even his neck remained rigid. He tried to turn, and couldn't move his arms, legs, or torso. He couldn't tell whether he'd been paralyzed or locked into place.

In his peripheral vision he could see Rona dragging herself—shattered lens, broken leg and all—toward unfamiliar magical devices, ones that she must have created herself. She left a trail of oil, blood, and fluorescent blue fluid behind her.

Karn strained against the strange magic that gripped him.

Rona levered herself up into a seated position. From her grunts it sounded agonizing.

"Your mistake," she said, "was not killing me when you had the chance. We have expected your coming, Karn. We have prepared."

He tried again to move, his internal mechanisms groaning with the effort, and felt his metal torque. He would bend—break—before he freed himself from Rona's magic through force.

Rona sorted through the heaped parts she'd been using to repair Sheoldred. She lifted up a node, smiled, and set it aside. With a grimace, she dug her fingers into her damaged eye socket and yanked out the ruined node, exposing raw tissue and a piece of gleaming skull near her eyebrow. A gout of clear liquid spurted out. She clicked the new node into place.

Roars boomed through the cavern. Rock sifted down, pinging against Karn's body.

"That," Rona said, "was the sound of our ships evacuating our forces from this staging area—which has been compromised—and retreating to a secondary staging area. We have many bases across Dominaria. You will not find them all."



Rona drove her glaive into her leg. She grunted, slicing through her clothing and her flesh. Her eyes teared—even the eye she'd replaced dripped. Panting, she bared her muscle and her broken bone to the cavern's air.

Karn had failed. Held with Rona's magic, he would be unable to warn his friends, unable to fight at their sides, unable to save them when the compleated Phyrexian agents exploded from their dearest companions to kill them.

The cavern had emptied and quieted enough that Karn could hear the click as Rona slid a device into her leg. She sighed and folded her flesh over the metal. She fixed another panel over her thigh, sealing her wound shut, and then stood. She rolled her shoulders and smiled.

"Sheoldred, in her beauty, my Whispering One," Rona said, "grows stronger by the day, and she will lead us to victory."

Karn, still arm-deep in Sheoldred's torso, could feel clicking vibrate along his body. Sheoldred split apart, dividing herself up in pieces. Her segments broke away, each piece sprouting a dozen viridian segmented legs. The swarm poured over Karn, using him as a bridge to the floor. The spider-like creatures ran along Karn's arms, down his back and torso, the backs of his knees, his calves. The *tink-tink-tink* of their metallic claws reverberated through him. A tarantula-sized piece sprang free from the cables onto Karn's face. It clung to his head, twitching, a heart-like nug-

get of flesh grafted into the center of its modified thorax. It crawled over his head. He could feel its wet slither down his back. It dropped to the floor and scampered away.

"I may not be able to stop you, Urza's creation," Rona said, "but I can prevent you from stopping us."

From the edge of his vision, Karn could see Rona limp down a tunnel. Even with her makeshift repairs, Rona remained heavily damaged, and she leaned on her glaive, using it as a cane. Her leg spurted yellow fluid, and she staggered. She paused to catch her breath. Oil dribbled from her new inserts, mingled with blood.

He turned his head to watch her. The field paralyzing Karn had weakened. Perhaps it was due to Rona's retreat. Did she carry the device with her that held him in place? Karn attempted to raise his arm. The effort shuddered through him. He lifted one finger.

Rona let her shoulder rest against the tunnel wall. She used her glaive to cut free a strip of cloth from her mantle. "I hope that as we take this world, as we make it more perfect, you feel the keenness of failure once again."

Karn strained against the force gripping him. His jaw ached. "What…"



Rona bound the cloth strip around her leaking leg in a tourniquet. "As you watch the people you've known for eons transform and turn against you, I hope it hurts."

"Why would you say that?" Karn managed. He had to keep her talking. If he could break free… "What I have I done to you that you would wish such horror upon me?"

"When the Mirrans became Phyrexian," Rona said, "it was the best thing that ever happened to them. They were independent from their creator. Unified. Beautiful."

The force holding Karn seemed to loosen. He needed to push free. Even with the Phyrexian staging ground in the Caves of Koilos empty, if Karn could capture Rona, as Sheoldred's right hand she would be able to provide valuable information. All was not yet lost.

"You'd kill them, wouldn't you," Rona said, "for reaching for perfection."

He only needed one more moment—

"You gave Memnarch your intelligence. Your capabilities. But he didn't have the experience to deal with it. The guidance. He was so lost." Rona's smile twisted. She enjoyed his struggle. "I can't stand bad parents."

Karn stopped. His body couldn't have reverberated more if she had struck him.

Rona flipped a switch on the wall. There was a small grating noise. Then, a series of booms overhead. The roar, as the cavern fell, engulfed him. Tons of rock poured onto him. A boulder rolled off the cavern's wall, then bounced into his chest. It tossed him onto his back. He stared up at the collapsing cavern, still paralyzed by Rona's device. Rocks sheeted down. Fist-sized pieces hammered into his body. Smaller pebbles thunked and plinked against him, rolling and filling in the gaps. His vision turned gray from dust, then blackened out as the stone obscured all light. The rock weighed upon him.

He could feel Rona's spell ease. He could move—or at least beneath all this stone, he could attempt to move, to twitch a finger. For whatever good it did him. Not even he could lift this stone. Not even he could dig his way out from this cave-in.

The crushing layer of rock was too heavy even for him to shift.

Karn reached for the spark that allowed him to planeswalk. It burned within him, hot and bright, such a perpetual companion that he had ceased to notice it. If he could just focus and—

It didn't work. Nothing happened.

Karn reached out with his special senses through his fingertips and analyzed the surrounding inorganic materials: olivine, granite, quartz, mica.



Ordinary stone, but with all the ancient interplanar and Phyrexian technology providing a low-grade interference, he could not planeswalk away.

He was trapped. Only he knew that Sheoldred had come to Dominaria, and he could warn no one.

# EPISODE II
# Sand In The Hourglass

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FREED FROM THE COLLAPSED CAVE BY AJANI,
KARN RACES TO WARN DOMINARIA
OF SHEOLDRED'S ARRIVAL.

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*"Caves of Koilos", by Julian Kok Joon Wen.*

Time trickled away more slowly than the grains of sand settling between the rocks. The fine particles sifted into Karn's joints. He didn't know how long he had lain here, pinned in the dark. Was it days or weeks that had passed? What if months had flown away, like a small and startled bird? What if was longer? Years, decades, eons—

No, he could not think of it.

No one would miss him. No one knew where he had gone. He should have told someone. He should have at least told Jhoira. Or Jaya. If he had told them, they would have known where to search and either freed him or seen the Phyrexians themselves.

What if the Phyrexians were the ones to find him? Would it be worse if no one found him? He might wait alone, forever in the darkness. In the silence.

Sand trickled down. A scrabbling noise. Maybe claws grating on rough stone.

A weight lifted away from his hand, exposing it to the chill air currents. He could move his fingers. Relief shot through him, a pang more powerful than the Blind Eternities. He stretched his fingers, marveling at the freedom of this small movement, the ability to make *any* movement. Something warm and soft touched his fingertips. Organic, impenetrable to his senses. Not Phyrexian. Gentle. Thoughtful.



He was found.

The warmth left his fingertips. Had his rescuer departed?

The scratching quickened. Rocks grated. Pebbles cascaded. Clunks as large rocks tossed away landed. The burden on him lightened. Karn strained. The material around him budged, shifting at the pressure of his enormous strength. Karn exercised the powerful mechanisms in his torso, pushing himself upright. Rocks poured away. He heaved himself up slowly. He wanted to take care not to hurt his rescuer with any stray stones.

As his efforts increased, the scratching noise ended. Footfalls retreated as his rescuer stepped clear. Karn would have to trust that they had moved to a safe distance.

Karn hauled himself to his feet. Stone poured off him, and he was free. The warm air caressed his body. He rolled his shoulders, reveling in their movement. The tumbling rock kicked up a gray haze. He shook the fine particles from his body and wiped clean his eyes.

Ajani stood in the tunnel, his fur a striking white in the torchlight. The pupil of his unscarred pale blue eye glinted with the nocturnal hue of a nighttime predator. His shoulders had a proud set to them, like he was pleased he'd found Karn. He granted Karn a friendly, close-lipped smile.

Karn nodded, tentative. He'd only met Ajani a few times. For Ajani's species, baring teeth was a hostile action, so this small smile was friendlier than a broad human grin.

"How did you find me?" Karn cleared his throat. It, too, felt dusty. The mechanism inside it clicked uncomfortably. "I told no one I was here."

Ajani coughed, awkward, deep in his chest. "After you didn't answer the letters, Jhoira became… worried about you. She asked Raff to place a tracking spell on the letters, one that would only activate when you—and only you—opened the envelope. That's how I located your camp."

Karn stilled, embarrassed. Had Jhoira known every time he'd read a letter, and left it unanswered? Every time he'd pushed aside the paper heaps on his worktop to make room for a new project? Had Ajani seen the chaotic clutter that populated his workspace? Karn would have never let his camp descend to such a state if he'd expected a visitor.

He evaded Ajani's gaze and investigated the joints in his body for damage. Ah, the spearhead. He'd forgotten he'd left that lodged in him.

"Every time you moved the letters, Jhoira knew you were alive," Ajani said, "and didn't want to talk. She was determined to give you the time you needed, and not to press you. She knows how private you can be when you are… upset."



Karn worked at the spearhead, trying to remove it from his body. The rockfall had jammed it even deeper into him.

"But when you stopped shuffling the letters around," Ajani continued, "she grew concerned. And here I am."

Karn grunted. He wiggled the spearhead back and forth, trying to loosen it from between his torso plate. His blunt fingers, though capable of the most detailed work, couldn't dig deep enough. He still couldn't believe Jhoira had known how often he'd looked at those letters, considered replying, and then set them aside. Too many times. "Jhoira is well?"

"She is in her workshop on the Mana Rig." Ajani shrugged.

"And the *Weatherlight*?"

"She returned the *Weatherlight* to its rightful owner," Ajani said. "Shanna captains it."

"Ah, good. Shanna will rise to the task." Karn had served with Sisay and was pleased to see the airship in her descendant's hands. "Do you mind if I…?" Ajani nodded at the spearpoint.

Karn shrugged.

Ajani was not as tall as Karn, but he was tall enough that he had to bend his head to inspect the spearhead. He inserted his claws into Karn's joints

with surprising delicacy. “You know, every Planeswalker goes through phases like this. We withdraw, especially if we have played a role in changing a world’s fate. I have seen it time and time again. After a great hunt, you feast, and you sleep. It’s natural, and there is no shame in that.”

“I do not feast, and I do not sleep,” Karn said.

“That does not mean you don’t need to recuperate.” Ajani eased the spearhead from Karn’s body.

Karn had never been permitted to “recuperate” when Urza had loosed him as a war machine. Urza had explained it was unnecessary and, indifferent to Karn’s weariness, had turned his attention to other, more interesting projects.

Ajani examined the spearpoint. Its metal glimmered a sickly green in the dimness. “You encountered more than a rockfall. What happened here, my friend?”

Karn didn’t wish to answer the question—not until he knew whether he could trust Ajani. The vision he’d had upon touching Sheoldred still thrummed within him—Phyrexian agents everywhere, hidden across Dominaria. Waiting. “How long have I been buried?”

“A few months,” Ajani admitted. “It took time to locate you.”

Months lost. Months that could have been spent preparing.



Sheoldred’s segmented parts had skittered along his paralyzed arms, down his back; spiderlike, they had poured over him. She would have had ample time to reassemble herself. Rona as well, he was sure.

“You have damaged yourself.” Karn nodded at Ajani, whose claw had torn at the cuticle, a wound that had most likely occurred when he had dug Karn out from the rockslide. “Let us return to my camp for supplies. I must also check the sensitive equipment there to verify that it is still functional.”

Karn did not voice what he feared most: Did he still have the Sylex and the clay tablet?

…

In the months Karn had been buried his campsite had remained undisturbed, but not unchanged; the small tents had gone dingy with mildew.

Ajani hunched his shoulders. He had a Planeswalker’s distaste for these caves. Even if one could not directly sense the interplanar technologies, their way of warping time made the space claustrophobic. Karn, too, could feel the pressure.

Karn led Ajani through his cluttered camp, then ducked into his main tent. The box holding the Sylex and the tablet remained where he’d left it and appeared to be locked. Karn ignored it, conscious of Ajani’s eyes on him.

Karn located a barrel with water—potable, though he normally used it for cleaning purposes—and a rag. He handed the rag to Ajani, to wash and wrap his wound.

"Why were you here, Karn?" Ajani rinsed his hand, working out the grit that had lodged in his wound.

Karn inventoried his equipment for damage as he replied. "Searching for artifacts. Due to the unique properties of the Caves of Koilos, not even the most entrepreneurial archeologists or enthusiastic researchers have plundered them." He made his way in a circuit around the tent, toward the box where he'd hidden the Sylex and its tablet. Casually. The box seemed intact, but he dared not open it. He reached out with his special senses. The tablet felt like mere clay, a combination of aluminum, silicon, magnesium, sodium, and other trace elements. The Sylex buzzed at him: present but indecipherable due to its powerful magic.

Karn set the box aside. He faced Ajani and related all he had seen.

"Sheoldred escaped?" Ajani paced in the tent's confines. "Karn, we must warn—"

"I have tried," Karn said. "Many times."

"Now you have seen Sheoldred."



Karn wished he could trust Ajani, but he shook his head. "The caves where I discovered the Phyrexian staging ground are no longer accessible. I have no proof that the Phyrexians have returned to Dominaria."

"Don't we?" Ajani held out the spearhead. "Karn, there is a peace summit between the Keldons and the Benalish. If any nations will take the Phyrexian return seriously, it's those two. I propose we speak to their leaders."

Ajani was right. Of all the nations in Dominaria, Keld and New Benalia were likeliest to listen to Karn's warning. Radha, the leader of the Keldons, had reforged that rugged nation of warriors into a devastating military force. Aron Capashen led New Benalia's knights, whose passion for justice made each one worth a dozen fighters. "Let me gather my finds and sensitive equipment before we go."

Ajani tapped an amulet hanging from his belt. "Jhoira gave me a summoning device for the *Weatherlight* before she sent me. Shanna will honor it."

"The *Weatherlight* may be a speedy ship, but she is not quick enough." Karn stacked several devices on the chest that held the Sylex and the tablet and loaded everything into a rucksack. "I propose that we planeswalk."

...

Karn did not know how other Planeswalkers perceived the Blind Eternities, but to him the interminable space felt like crushed velvet, its luke-

warm prickle sometimes verging on pain. The vertigo plunging through Karn contrasted with the sense that he wasn't moving at all, which was at odds with the feeling that he pulled himself along a cord to an unknown destination. He burst through a silken gash into cool air.

Karn stood knee-deep in wild grasses, orange poppies, and purple-flowering thistles. Inland, the farms seemed young, recently cleared land holding fields yellow with blooming canola. The homesteads bled into mountains, the misty temperate rainforests punctuated with emerald alpine meadows.

If he had been human, he would have taken a single shuddering breath.

To his other side, a large stone statue protected a seaport whose buildings and streets were carved into white chalk cliffs. Eons ago, a Phyrexian portal ship must have decapitated the statue, and the decrepit hulk lay atop the statue's neck. Overgrown with honeysuckle, it shadowed the city's colorful awnings. In the center of the bay, a worn-smooth island protruded from the water—the statue's head, now home to seabirds.

Ajani led Karn down narrow paths past modest homes carved into the chalk. These seemed small and well worn in contrast to the newly sculpted city hall, which had large but chunky dimensions, wide windows, and balconies framed with ornate columns.

"Do you know where the peace talks are occurring?" Karn asked.



Ajani paused and cocked his head. "Follow the sound of arguing, I suppose."

Karn could hear nothing. The leonin's senses had to be spectacular.

Ajani led Karn through a grand but empty reception area, then up a narrow set of stairs. The corridors linking the rooms felt claustrophobic, lit only by torches. They pushed between brass-bound double doors into a light-filled room dominated by a long granite table. A broad balcony overlooked the sea, and a male varied thrush—orange breast with a black collar, black mask, and black cap, a beautiful creature—perched on its railing.

To one side sat the representatives of House Capashen of Benalia. The nobleman at the table—Aron Capashen, a middle-aged man with light ochre skin—had a proud tower with seven colored windows embroidered onto his silks. The knights arrayed behind him, their silver armor chased with gold, their stained-glass shields held at the ready, possessed the same gilded motif on their breastplates.

To the other side lounged the large gray-skinned Keldon warriors with their heavy leather armor and their heavier weapons. Their warlord—Radha—sat opposite the Capashen nobleman. She had a Keldon's ash-colored skin, black mane, and bulky muscles, but the pointed ears and blue markings of a Skyshroud elf.

Other officials, led by a man from New Argive who had fair skin and a black goatee, lined the sides of the granite negotiation table between the two conflicting parties.

Ajani and Karn must have arrived as the negotiations were set to begin, because only a moment later both Jodah and Jaya arrived. Jodah portaled in, stepping through a door his magic sliced into the air. His office, cluttered with books and bric-a-brac, vanished when the portal slid closed. Jaya planeswalked into the room, appearing with a flash and the smell of charcoal.

"It's been a while, old man." Jaya gave Jodah a friendly embrace.

With his boyish features and shaggy brunette hair, Jodah could have been Jaya's grandson, even though he was thousands of years her senior. "Come for the family silver?"

"Oh, there's nothing silver here that I like enough to keep—except for my hair. I've already checked your pockets. Thought about taking up lint farming?"

Jodah smiled. "I'm not worried. Your tongue is quicker than your fingertips."

Jaya's gaze fell on Karn and Ajani. "Well, this is a surprise. Are you two here to work on the negotiations as well?"



Ajani regarded Jaya, solemn. "We must speak to you regarding what Karn has seen in the Caves of Koilos. The Phyrexians have returned to Dominaria."

The idle small talk at the negotiation table dropped into shocked silence. Jodah and Jaya exchanged looks, then turned their attention to Karn. The Keldons, Benalish, and Argivians broke into argument, the overlapping dialects and accents turning their fears into babble. Only the Benalish knights remained at their posts, their rigid posture a testament to their discipline.

Jaya had paled. "It hardly seems possible."

"I have walked this world for millennia," Jodah said, "and I have read the stories, examined the histories. I have visited the ruins: I tell you this not to boast but so that you know I speak the truth—the Phyrexians cannot traverse the Blind Eternities."

"Sheoldred has traveled between worlds—" Karn said.

"Only Planeswalkers can do that now." Jodah pinched the bridge of his nose. "If I recall, Karn, that is a reality you helped usher in." His age—similar to Urza's, when Urza had created Karn—overwrote his young features with exhaustion. Karn could not believe Jodah would deny the truth, not when Karn had seen Sheoldred. Perhaps most Phyrexians could not survive the journey through the Blind Eternities, but Sheoldred had: even

if it had burned away her organic materials, even if it had damaged and weakened her, somehow she had succeeded.

Aron Capashen stood and paced. He seemed agitated. “The Phyrexians are ancient history. I cannot see what you would have to gain by asserting this.”

“I located a staging ground for a new invasion,” Karn said, “led by one of New Phyrexia’s leaders, a praetor named Sheoldred. The Society of Mishra serves her, and the Phyrexians are compleating dozens of ordinary citizens. We cannot know how many Phyrexians are stationed throughout Dominaria’s nations. They may even be among us now.”

“Have I not been warning you of this?” The young nobleman from New Argive stood. Based on his gold-embroidered and fur-lined finery, he had to be an important official. “Phyrexian sleeper agents will permeate every layer of society if we do not act now. For all we know, they already have!”

“Stenn, your alarmist tendencies are not helping,” Jodah said. “Karn, where are the Phyrexians now?”

The varied thrush fixed a beady eye on him as if curious about his answer.

Karn did not have an answer. “They evacuated while I was incapacitated. I do not know.”





*“Stenn, Paranoid Partisan”, by Mila Pesic.*

Jodah sighed. “The diplomatic situation is too sensitive to halt negotiations now. If you knew where they were, this would be a different matter, but without stronger information, like a location, how could we act to root them out?”

“And even if the Phyrexians were on Dominaria,” Jaya said, “historically they’ve divided before they conquered. If we leave this conflict between Benalia and the Keldons unresolved, we’d play right into their hands.”

The thrush hopped along the railing.

"Karn, are you listening to me?" Jodah asked.

Karn returned his attention to Jodah. He placed the spearhead on the table. "I am."

"I have seen weapons from the Society of Mishra before," Jodah said, mild.

"When has Karn ever lied?" Ajani growled. "If he says he saw Sheoldred compleating people, then we are in danger."

"I believe you," Aron said. "But I cannot send my soldiers chasing whispers and rumors across Dominaria. Between the hostilities with the Keldons and fighting off the Cabal's resurgence, I don't have the fighters."

"His troops have the same engagements as mine." Radha laughed, a short bark. "I suppose we have found common ground in that."

Jodah glanced between Radha and Aron. "The Phyrexians haven't been a threat for centuries. I know that your memory is long, Karn. As is mine. If we address today's issue—the conflict between the Capashens and the Keldons—we can then discuss redeploying those same soldiers to fight the Phyrexians."



So many people had screamed in Sheoldred's lair, their voices thin and their pain sharp beneath the ecstatic orisons to her glory. "What of the lives Sheoldred now takes?"

Jodah placed his hand on Karn's shoulder. "We may not be talking about something as grand as an interplanar invasion, but lives are being lost to this conflict. They matter too."

"We will go with you, Karn," said Jaya. "We will search for them. But now? Let us focus on the task at hand."

Karn could feel the room's attention swing back to the table, and the negotiations.

The thrush flew away.

"Stenn," Jaya said, "have someone show Karn and Ajani to the guest quarters."

...

Karn's room was simple, its furniture basic but well crafted: a bed, a large table with two chairs, and a washstand with a porcelain basin in it. Karn pushed the bed to one side and moved the table into the room's center. He unloaded his backpack, taking care to ensure the Sylex, still in its case, was secure.

"The most coherent argument Jodah and Jaya had against assisting us," Karn said, "was that we do not know where the Phyrexians are. If we can determine their location, then we will be able to persuade Jodah and Jaya to help."

"And perhaps the others as well." Ajani paused, his powerful body coiled. "How?"

"A scrying device." Karn lifted his hand above the tabletop. He generated first the viewing plane, a copper sheet covered in crystal. He filled the narrow layer between the two materials with liquid. The device's remainder, a complex assemblage of mechanical parts, required his concentration. His body buzzed with the magic coursing through him.

Ajani watched him, the pale blue of his unscarred eye attentive. "What is that?"

"It is for viewing remote locations." Karn let pride seep into his voice. He'd developed the plan for it himself, and he knew of no other device that could perform similarly. Karn focused on Jhoira. Not on her face. Not on her physical presence, but on her essence, the qualities that made her *Jhoira*. How she always saw through a person's circumstances to their essence. How she was willing to give everyone the benefit of a doubt.

The Mana Rig resolved within the crystal. At first fuzzy, the image filled with depth, then color. Perched upon a cliff's edge in Shiv's brutal desert,



the metal structure had the size and complexity of a small city. The image tightened into a single location, a workshop with Jhoira in it. She sat at a workbench, her head bent, bronze hair bound and falling between her shoulder blades. She flipped a disconnected toggle back and forth as if thinking.

"Can you view Sheoldred?" Ajani asked.

All too easily could Karn visualize Sheoldred: her humanoid torso rising from her scorpion-like body; her voice, intimate and resonant inside his head. *Karn… such plans.*

The scryer's image dissolved into mistiness. Karn leaned back on his heels. Ajani glanced at Karn. "They must have protections in place to prevent us from scrying them."

"A sensible precaution." Unfortunately.

Ajani pulled the amulet from his belt that could summon the *Weatherlight*. He placed it in Karn's palm. "You'll need this."

Karn examined the amulet. It seemed a straightforward device. "I can twin this."

Ajani smiled, his lips closed. "Even better."

Karn extended his senses into the amulet. He reproduced it, the metal coiling up from his fingertips to form an identical amulet. Ajani clipped the original to his belt while Karn manufactured a chain for his copy. Karn hung the amulet from his neck, feeling odd about the adornment. Normally he eschewed such things.

A varied thrush perched on Karn's windowsill, behind Ajani's shoulder.

If Karn could draw the Phyrexians out, he would not need to find them. He'd know where they were. The Phyrexians wanted to neutralize Dominaria's most powerful weapons. That included the Sylex. He would use news of its presence to lure them into the open. But first he had to hide the Sylex somewhere safe.



*"Phyrexian Espionage", by Allen Williams.*



"Perhaps if we could speak to Jaya alone," Ajani suggested, "we could persuade her. She is no diplomat at heart."

Karn stared at the varied thrush, so still, so attentive. "Perhaps."

Karn let himself into the negotiations. Stenn was setting an inkwell on the granite table as Jodah and Jaya gave both Radha and Aron Capashen quill pens. He did not wish to interrupt before they signed. The sea breeze poured over the balcony, cool with springtime's edge.

"You are an impressive leader," Aron said. "I am proud to enter this new era with you."

Radha smiled. "You do like to talk fancy."

"And you like to be mistaken for a brute," Aron Capashen said. "Anyone who takes you for a simple warrior must soon regret it."

Jodah smiled. "Radha, Aron will bring this agreement to the other houses to present for ratification. I will accompany him to ensure that this process is accomplished within the next few months, during which all hostilities in the Ice Rime Hills will cease."

Radha put up her hands, conceding. “Yes, yes. The sacred sites aren’t worth any more war—no matter what artifacts they might contain.”

A breeze stirred the room as a pale blue bead of light formed midair. The light whorled outward into a disc that brightened into azure as Teferi stepped through the vortex. He’d aged well: his shoulders had broadened with middle age, gray threaded his hair, and his umber skin had health’s warm blush to it.

“Another Planeswalker?” Aron sat back in his chair, exasperated.

“It must be a sign of interesting times,” Radha said.

Jodah stood. “What’s happened?”

“It’s the Phyrexians—they were on Kamigawa.” Teferi closed his eyes and shook his head. “Given what Kaya told me of what she saw on Kaldheim—”

“They can travel between planes,” Jaya said, lips drawn tight.

After a moment, Jodah said, “That is alarming, to say the least.”

Had not Karn explained this to both Jaya and Jodah? He had seen this, with his own eyes. He felt Sheoldred’s touch on his body, in his mind. Yet Teferi had arrived, bearing secondhand news, and Jodah and Jaya believed his assertions? Where were their requests for “proof of a location” now?



Karn might as well have been a statue for all the regard they had given him. And the threat Teferi had warned them of wasn’t even on Dominaria.

But none of that mattered. Only one fact remained relevant: “If the Phyrexians have traveled between multiple worlds, then their invasion plans are much more widespread and well-coordinated than we anticipated.”

Radha tensed. “Then we must fight.”

Aron shook his head. His knights seemed restless, hands twitching toward their swords as if they expected to launch into action. “I never would have thought I’d live to see another Phyrexian invasion.”

“The true Twilight has come,” one of Radha’s warriors hissed. “How can we battle such creatures?”

“However bad it is,” Stenn said, “what will come is worse.”

Jodah gave Jaya his calmest “help me” expression. Jaya flapped her hand at Karn and Ajani, as if asking them to remove Teferi, the origin of this disruption. Radha and Aron had not signed—and this made it seem like they wouldn’t. Jodah looked like he’d bitten down on a charged piece of aluminum.

“I have the feeling that my timing was less than immaculate,” Teferi said.

“You don’t say,” Jaya said, and gave them a meaningful look.

"I am not certain about this mutual protection clause—" Aron began.

"It might be best to look to our own shores, our own peoples—" Radha said.

Karn ushered Teferi away toward the door. Teferi let him.

...

As planeswalking had exhausted Teferi, Karn and Ajani led him to the suite adjacent to theirs.

Outside, spring rain pattered down against the cliffside. The rosemary plants growing from cracks in the stone scented the air that wafted through the unglazed windows. Did rosemary's scent please Karn because he liked it? Or because Urza had designed him to like it? Karn would never know.

Teferi always made Karn consider his origins. Not always comfortably.

"How is Niambi?" Karn asked.

"She's providing medical aid to the nomadic tribes in Jamuraa." Teferi's pride in his daughter radiated from him. "And Jhoira?"

"I have not spoken to Jhoira in some time." Karn wished that Urza had made his face with a human's mobility and its subtlety in micro-expressions, so that it would be easier for him to signal to Teferi that he did not wish to speak about this.



Ajani glanced between Teferi and Karn as if the awkward silence stretching between them were visible, a piece of string tight enough to twang. "Something else is troubling you."

"I did not wish to say this before the Keldons and Benalish," Teferi admitted, "but they took Tamiyo. Even Planeswalkers might be vulnerable to them now... We waited too long, Ajani."

Ajani froze, shock plain across his face. "Tamiyo?"

Teferi nodded wearily. "We can discuss it after I've gotten some rest."

Karn watched as Ajani's hands curled into tight fists, anger and sorrow crossing his friend's face. He hadn't known they were close.

"I should rest as well," said the leonin after a moment.

Karn accepted this as his cue to depart. Back in his room, he opened the case with the Sylex and the tablet in it. He removed the tablet, then re-locked the case, and set it on the table. He'd keep this here, to research it. But the Sylex—that he needed to rehome.

Somewhere safe. And he knew just the place.

Karn pressed his palms to the scryer's crystal-covered copper. Jhoira's image appeared. She was no longer in her workshop, but sleeping, her

face crunched into her pillow, her reddish brown hair lying in a messy braid across one cheek. Karn let her image fade.

...

Evading the Oyster Bay guards was simple: the people here may have once made great pirates but they had not adopted the organized banality of guard duty. Karn, large in the shadows, avoided any light that would glint from his body. He slipped through the town's carved streets, sticking to the darkness, up and around to the top of the cliff.

He hiked along the Phyrexian portal ship's spine, its degraded metal softened with wildflowers like purple asters and goldenrod, toward a hill blanketed in young vine maples. Ferns rustled at Karn's shins and the damp air condensed on his body.

Now a sufficient distance to avoid tweaking Jaya and Jodah's senses, Karn stepped through the searing Blind Eternities, tearing a wound in it. The edges fluttered against his body. He passed through it to Shiv and the Mana Rig, straight into Jhoira's workshop. It held a breathless silence, like every instrument in it waited for Jhoira to wake.

Karn located a supply closet. He stowed the Sylex and its case on the lowest shelf behind lengths of pipe whose dust promised that Jhoira had not needed them recently. He generated two devices: one alarm that would register if the pipes moved, and another weight-sensitive alarm that would





*"Karn's Sylex", by Adam Paquette.*

notify him if anyone moved the box itself. There. The Sylex was safe. Or as safe as it could be. Karn stepped back into the Blind Eternities.

Back on the forest hill, Karn wound his way downhill toward Oyster Bay. A light glimmered between the pale slender-trunked birch trees. A silhouetted person held aloft a lamp. Karn paused, but the lamp had glinted from his body. He had been seen. The figure moved closer. Stenn, the New Argivian noble from the negotiation table.

A nightjar called, its low warble traveling between the trees.

What if his precautions had not been enough?

"Out for a walk?" Stenn called.

"Yes," Karn said. "I do not sleep. You are awake late?"

"No, up early." As Stenn neared, his features grew clearer. His beard was trimmed and his hair tidy. "Dawn is the only time I truly feel safe. At peace. With the smell of baking bread wafting over the city, with the citizens starting to wake, I can imagine we aren't at war."

Morning had begun to whiten the sky. The air tasted like dew and cinnamon.

"I overheard the other Planeswalkers saying that you're immune to Phyrexian influence?"

"Yes."

"This means you may be the only Planeswalker that can be trusted." Stenn's sable mantle beaded with water. "You aren't the only one who can read the signs of invasion. King Darien has tasked me with discovering Phyrexian agents. Obviously, this is not common knowledge."

"What will you do after you discover such an agent?" Karn asked.



"What must be done," Stenn said. "The only thing that can be done. Once someone is compleated—they are lost, whether they know it or not."

"They don't know themselves?"

"No," Stenn said. "I think they are more useful to the Phyrexians—and harder to discover—if they themselves do not know."

It made sense that those forced to act against their own interests, their families, and their very world, would be kept oblivious of their own actions. The Phyrexians had to be inserting these unknowing sleeper agents everywhere. Yet to kill such people, people who had already been so wronged… King Darien must've selected Stenn for his ruthlessness.

"Have you ever caught such an agent?" Karn asked.

"No. Not yet." Stenn gazed at the dawn-glazed sea. Fishing boats skidded along the waves, tan sails belling. "Teferi's news frightened them."

Karn nodded. "They should be frightened. Do you think Benalia and Keld will unify?"

"I don't know," Stenn admitted, "but I do know that I can promise this: New Argive will mobilize. We will stand with you in defense of Dominaria."

Karn nodded, relieved that someone had taken him as a credible source. He had found his first ally willing to provide military support. “We can discuss the details later.”

In town, few seemed wakeful—only bakers tucking yeasty loaves into ovens and children milking goats and feeding chickens. Sometimes, Karn imagined their pains: losing a pet rooster to the dining table, spilling a much-needed bucket of milk. Long after these people had died, Karn would continue to ponder their lives.

He felt old. Old, and tired. And the children’s beautiful brevity seemed an unbearable tragedy in this still morning.

When Karn reached the city hall, Ajani was awake, pacing between banks of ropey wisteria vines. Ajani paused, his body quivering with tension, and his tail lashed once. Karn suspected this was not a voluntary gesture. He had seen how the leonin seemed to smother his non-human mannerisms when near humans. Ajani’s blue eye caught the light in the dimness, pupil glinting a predator’s green.

“Karn. Do you think the humans are awake yet?” Ajani asked. “Jodah and Jaya will sit the representatives down at the negotiation table once more today.”



Karn could summon no patience for how Jodah continued to prioritize this small human conflict before the Phyrexian threat. “Some are. I encountered Stenn this morning, and he has pledged New Argive’s forces.”

“Then let us speak to Jaya,” Ajani said, “before negotiations recommence.”

...

“You two would be much more compassionate toward me right now if you had heard of this substance called ‘caffeine,’” Jaya muttered.

“I have heard of it,” Karn said.

“It is vile,” Ajani said.

Teferi entered the room and opened the doors to the balcony. The chilly sea breeze freshened the room, bringing it with springtime’s rising birdsong. A seagull landed on the balcony and cocked its head, looking at Teferi’s bread roll in a meaningful way. A varied thrush landed on the rail, then jumped along it. Could it be the same bird as yesterday? How could such a shy woodland bird, with its orange breast, tolerate a seagull?

“It isn’t important who can charge what taxes at which border,” Ajani said. “We should be prioritizing the fight against the Phyrexians.”

“Correct.” Karn eyed the thrush. “And keeping the Sylex from Phyrexian hands.”

"The Sylex?" Ajani started. "You have it with you?"

"I had it in my possession," Karn said, "as I planned to deploy it on New Phyrexia and eradicate the Phyrexian threat at its source once I determined its workings."

"Karn, we agreed to handle that together. You can't go there alone," said Teferi, serious.

"You said yourself that we waited too long. All of you promised me your help, and then you told me to be patient. No longer," said Karn.

The thrush was not even pretending to peck at invisible crumbs.

Karn seized the bird. "I know what you are."

"Karn—" Jaya said.

The bird's chest peeled open and cables shot out. The cables, slick with blood and slime, wrapped themselves around Karn's head. Goo slipped down his skin and a maw at the tentacle's core searched along Karn's cheek for purchase, its teeth scraping down the smooth metal. Karn readjusted his grip around the creature's slippery body, trying to pull it from his face. But its wires had wrapped all the way around his head, locking together in a thick tangle at the nape of his neck. The creature's teeth caught on Karn's lip. It jabbed needle-like protuberances into him, like it wanted to inject him with some substance, and the needles snapped.



"It's too close to Karn," Jaya shouted. "I can't blast it."

"Let me—" Ajani said.

Slime sloughed off the creature and sizzled on Karn's skin, corroding his metal. It hurt. The creature snaked its tentacles between the joints on Karn's neck and around his collar, as if trying to prize him apart. Karn grunted and squeezed his fingers between the creature's slippery body and his face. He forced it off him, flinging it across the room where it smacked against the opposite wall and slid down. The creature caterpillar-crawled toward the door.

Teferi raised his hands, slowing the creature within a blurring field to prevent its rapid escape. Ajani lunged forward and pierced the creature with his claws, pinning it to the floor. It shrieked and writhed. Acid spurted from the wound.

Karn, face still steaming from the creature's corrosive slime, held out both hands, one over the other. He generated a bird cage, building it upward until the bars united into a dome. Ajani ripped the monstrosity from the floor and flung it into the cage.

It rattled the bars, screeching.

Jaya crossed her arms. "Turns out Jodah has bigger things to worry about than taxes."

Karn placed the Phyrexian bird on the granite negotiation table. Jodah leaned toward it, his eyes widening. The creature in the cage hissed at him. Aron Capashen looked sick. His Benalish knights had not moved, their discipline iron-clad. Radha stared at it, eyes glittering. Her warriors had broken out into muttered prayers. Stenn's lips had thinned in satisfaction that his point was made.

"They're here," Jodah murmured. "Among us."

"I told you—" Stenn said.

Three of the Benalish knights exploded outward from their armor. Their eyes burst open in a shower of glistening black oil and their jaws distended, metal teeth emerging from their flesh to stud their gaping maws. Metallic fibers wriggled out from between the gaps in their armor. One of the creatures swung toward the granite table, his clawed hands drawn together in a double fist. It slammed its hands down on the granite table, cracking it in two.

"The negotiations are over," it said.

Its comrade seized Aron with its writhing tentacles, bundling him up like a spider would a fly.

Karn strode forward, Teferi and Ajani flanking him. Jaya held up her hands, summoning fire into her palms. Jodah gathered energy, distorting the air around him with ribbons of color, and then solidified it into a forcefield to protect the unchanged Benalish soldiers from the Phyrexians.

"For Gerrard," one woman bellowed, lifting her sword. She dodged past Jodah's barrier to charge her ex-comrades. The Phyrexian knight avoided her blow by splitting itself in two: it slid apart into two meaty pieces, legs sprouting from what had once been glistening internal organs. Both halves attacked.



*"Protect the Negotiators", by Dominik Mayer.*

"The First Wind of Ascension is Forger," Radha called, backing toward the door. She—like Aron—had come to the negotiation table unarmed.

"Burning away impurity!" Her warriors bellowed, forming up around her to protect her. They fought off the lashing tentacles that reached to seize her, chopping off the Phyrexians' limbs. But any appendage that hit the ground seemed to gain life of its own, sprouting legs and teeth, squirming toward the retreating Keldons.

The Argivians fell back, joining the Keldons, fighting with their rapiers, the weapons of nobles who had never seen battle and never expected to. Stenn himself only wielded a dagger. Separated from his people, he backed away between the shards of the broken table until he reached Jaya's wreath of protective flame. Karn had almost reached Aron.

The Phyrexian holding him released a low laugh like an opening steam valve. It rolled its body around Aron and bounded onto a neighboring balcony. Ajani snarled with frustration and launched himself after it.

Ajani! Karn could not follow—the balconies would break under his weight if he tried to leap after light-footed Ajani. Karn made a noise, low in his chest, with frustration, and took a step back. Teferi cursed.

"I can't jump that distance," Teferi said.

The Keldons had reached the door.



"I do not wish to leave you, Archmage," Radha shouted. "Keld stands with Dominaria—for Dominarians. We will battle this blasphemy alongside you, to defend all peoples."

"Go," Jodah shouted. "We will fight together another day!"

"There are too many of them," Karn said. "Blockade them in this room!"

Radha nodded, once.

The brass double doors slammed shut, locking the Planeswalkers and the mage into the room with the Phyrexians.

Jaya swirled her hands up and around, blocking off the Phyrexians from Jodah, protecting him. Her flame burned white with a vicious heat. Karn had no doubt that Jaya's magic could defeat even this. He pushed himself through the heat. It seared the tentacles trying to wriggle into the joints of his body, ending them.

"Much as I'd love to do this all day," Jaya said, throwing a fireball at a writhing hunk of metal and flesh, "Jodah?"

"I have summoned the energy." Jodah's eyes were aglow with it, his skin incandescent. "But I need to know where to direct it to create the portal. A secure location."

"Argivia," Stenn gasped. He flicked a piece of tentacle off him with his blade, and stomped on it. Blood and oil spurted beneath his boot, and he turned toward the next encroaching tentacle and speared it through. "New Argive's watchtower."

"It is as safe a place as any." Karn retreated toward Jodah, Teferi at his side.

Jodah's portal spun into existence behind him. It opened up, like a doorway cut into the air itself, revealing a small circular room.

Jodah retreated through it to sustain it from the other side.

"I'll hold them off," Jaya said, searing the writhing cables with her fire. "If you can get through the portal, I'll blast this room with such fire that not a single piece of Phyrexian will remain. Go!"

"My thanks," Stenn said. He backed through the portal as well.

"And mine as well," Teferi said, and vanished through the whirling vortex.

Jaya grinned in triumph as she raised her hands in a blaze of fire and set the whole room alight. The screams of the Phyrexians, wet and unnatural, whistled.

Karn stepped through the portal. The magic tingled across his skin and swallowed him, depositing him on the other side. A shape, airborne, flicked past him. Karn turned to search for it. He couldn't see any movement in the small room but for those who had arrived with him: Stenn, Jodah, Jaya, Teferi, and himself.



Jaya, last through the portal, joined Karn at his side.

Jodah closed the portal and collapsed, sagging to the ground. Transporting so many people was no easy feat—even for Jodah.

The humans all sat on the floor, sweating, panting, and bleeding, while Karn remained standing. He searched the room for the flickering shadow. The tower room had tiny arched windows ringing it and was empty but for a pedestal in the center, which seemed to have a control panel on it. Overhead a golden light shimmered through a crystal—no, not a crystal: a powerstone.

A shadow flitted across the powerstone's face.

"One followed us," Karn said.

"We must not let it escape. It could wreak havoc on the city." Stenn flipped a toggle on the central control panel. The watchtower thumped as gears ground to life. The walls' interiors echoed with the rattle of moving chains. Steel shutters and blast doors slammed shut, blocking out all light. The room instantly felt stuffier, more claustrophobic. Stenn handed Karn the key. "You are the only one who's incorruptible, so it's only right that you have it."

Jaya bumped her shoulder into Jodah's. "You never get tired of being right, do you?"

"The millennia may wear on, but no. No, I do not." Jodah's smile faded, and he turned to Karn.

"Nothing and no one may leave while the tower is in lockdown," Stenn said.

Teferi eyed the steel shutters. "We must capture and destroy the Phyrexian trapped here. And we must determine if any among us has been compromised. We need to know who we can trust before we can plan how to defeat them."

"Agreed," Jodah said.

The group checked the room. The small Phyrexian thing that had come with them had escaped the chamber. Karn surmised it must have squirreled itself away through some crack in the stone. He strung the key from the same chain as he used to hang the scryer and the beacon to summon the *Weatherlight* and turned to face his companions. A frisson of unease traveled through his body, as if an electric current arced through him. Jodah, Jaya, Teferi, Stenn… How could he determine who he could trust?

If the Phyrexians were already on Dominaria, who could anyone trust?

# EPISODE III
# The Locked Tower

KARN, TEFERI, STENN, JAYA AND JODAH
HAVE ESCAPED THE CHAOS OF THE DIPLOMATIC SUMMIT
TO A WATCHTOWER IN NEW ARGIVE.
BUT ARE THEY REALLY SAFE?



*"Temporary Lockdown", by Bryan Sola.*

Karn wished to be alone. He wished to be working on research—if only he could lose himself in a mathematical formula's crispness, if only he could forget how it felt to have oil and blood drying on his body. But he could not escape. He was locked into New Argive's watchtower, in a small circular upper room ringed in steel-shuttered windows. The dim yellow glow of the powerstone overhead illuminated a pedestal with a control panel beneath it. Only he had the key that would end the tower's lockdown and he would not use it, not until they'd captured the Phyrexian, and not until he knew for certain his companions—Jodah and Jaya, Teferi and Stenn—were free from New Phyrexia's influence.

"Where's the Sylex?" Jaya asked.

"Safe," Karn replied.

He turned away so that the others could not see his face. He needed a cloth but could not generate one. He held out his hands and drew particles from the aether, creating a small wire brush, identical to the one he'd used so many years ago, to clean himself after Urza sent him to war. His palms fizzed with magic as metal accrued.

"Why not tell us where it is now?" Jaya asked.

Teferi craned his head as if still searching the ceiling for the Phyrexian spy-creature. "Even Planeswalkers can be corrupted now. Karn's the only one with immunity to the oil."



While Karn appreciated that Teferi defended him, he did not like being spoken of as if he weren't in the room, as if he were an object. But he supposed old habits died hard. Teferi had been Urza's student before Karn's birth.

"I'm not a spy." Jaya seemed insulted.

"You wouldn't know if you were," Stenn said.

"I have a plan to find and defeat Sheoldred," Karn said. "I will tell you what it is once we have secured the tower."

Jodah rubbed his temples, looking irritable and drawn. Karn suspected portaling them all had strained the mage's capacity. Jodah said, "I'll trust you. I should have done so sooner, anyway."

"I can't say I like the idea of jumping through hoops to prove myself to you, Karn," Jaya said. "I can understand why you think we have to do it. But I don't like it. My circus days are over, and I was never all that interested in performing tricks."

"We need to find the Phyrexian creature first," Jodah said.

"Splitting up will be the most efficient way to search for the creature," Karn said.

"Jaya and I can take the upper floors," Jodah said. "Teferi and Karn can take the lower."

"That leaves me alone for the basement level." Stenn grimaced. "I suppose that's just as well. It's mostly one big boiler room. I'm liking this plan less and less."

...

Karn led Teferi down the narrow metal stairs. The grating creaked underfoot, designed to accommodate a light human frame, not a ton of metal.

The hall in the third floor was narrow, the stone gray.

A click, and mechanical lamps flickered into dim life. "The toggle that controls the lights is next to the door," said Teferi, pleased.

"It may have passed this direction." Karn touched his fingers to a blood-and-slime trail on the wall at his shoulder height. "Let us follow it."

The trail terminated at a door labeled "STORAGE: WATERWORKS." Blobs of slime coated the hinge as if the creature had squeezed through the gap. Teferi crouched. He did not touch it, but his hand hovered over the goop. He looked up at Karn. "Should we call the others?"

"Not yet." Karn paused. "We don't know if the creature is still here."

Teferi opened the door a crack, then paused.



When nothing jumped through the gap, Teferi swung it open and stepped through. Karn followed. Tall racks of unused copper pipes loomed to one side. The other side had steel shelving that held wooden crates brimming with gears, flanges, and valves. Karn could see no further sign of the creature's passage.

Nonetheless: "Teferi, let us search the room."

The tight passages between the storage racks were designed to admit humans. Karn felt large and unwieldy. His elbows clanged against pipes and he jostled boxes when he pressed through the narrow aisles. He paused, and then knelt, ducking awkwardly under a low-hanging steam pipe. Blood dripped from the underside of a shelf.

He traced the fluid upward, to its source. It looked as though several pipes were… bleeding? A throbbing chunk of meat had attached itself, barnacle-like, to the copper. It released a gout of acid, dissolving the metal, and then it regurgitated a metallic barb from its side. Karn reached out to the fleshy deposit and crushed it.

"Karn, I need you to come over here."

Karn traced Teferi's voice and found Teferi standing in the corner near a wooden rack with tubs of sealant stacked upon it. Teferi pressed his fingers to his lips and tilted his head in a "listening" gesture.

"I don't like this." Jodah's voice carried through the pipes, clear.

"Don't like what?" Jaya.

Karn frowned at Teferi. Teferi pointed at a vent.

"That Karn is having us search before telling us his plan." Jodah sounded bothered. "Shouldn't we talk this through together, work out the details as a team?"

Karn traced the vent with his gaze. The pipes disappeared into the ceiling.

Despite Jaya's earlier objection to jumping through hoops, Karn heard her low laugh. "Oh, so you're assuming your way is the only way to do this? Remind you of anyone?"

"Jaya, it's not like—"

"Go on." Jaya's laugh rang. "Protest some more. That'll really make your case."

The voices faded.

Karn contemplated the overhead vent. "It seems possible that the Phyrexian spy can use these vents to travel between floors."

Teferi pointed, without touching, at black oil on the vent's corner, then down to a vent on the floor. Karn crouched to view it. It looked as though



the metal had been cannibalized, or possibly transformed, into an eyeball, ringed with small vicious teeth rather than lashes. Small additional eyes nestled beside it, opening and closing. Overhead, a skittering noise, then the click of metal claws ringing along the vents.

Teferi craned. "What do you think we should do?"

Karn pivoted, seeking the noise's source. It stopped. He'd lost it. "Unlike the others, you don't seem to take issue with my unilateral creation of a plan."

"Urza used you like a tool," Teferi said. "I never questioned it. I should have, and recently… Niambi got me thinking. I wish I'd been more thoughtful, when I'd been younger. More observant. And that I'd treated you better."

Karn traced a *ting-ting-ting* along the pipes. He pursued it into the storeroom's corner and then located a small vent in the floor. Slime and blood slid down between the metal slots, thick and clotting. "We must proceed back to the stairs, then down to the second floor."

Karn led Teferi back into the stairwell. The metal creaked under his weight but did not bend. The bolts fixing it to the stone held.

Teferi's words had fallen short of an apology but had been heartfelt. Karn understood that what he was about to do was manipulative given their current conversation. But he felt he had little choice. "Thank you,

Teferi. I need your help. Even I cannot watch the Sylex continuously using the scryer. I have hidden it in a sea cave by Tolaria West."

Teferi nodded, solemn. "I honor your trust in me. I can help you guard it."

A shout reverberated down the stairwell: Jodah.

Karn reversed course. He sprinted up the stairs, the grate rattling under his footsteps. Teferi ran after him, a touch slower due to his human limitations.

Karn located Jodah and Jaya on the fourth floor in a small office located off the main corridor. Jodah flung the squid-like Phyrexian off him and it splatted into a wall. Jaya pressed her hands together and blasted it with white hot flame—and the creature split into halves, avoiding the fire. Each half sprouted multiple multi-jointed legs from its gory insides. Hungry mouths bloomed along its carapace, ringed in tiny razor-sharp teeth.

Jaya parted her hands, dividing her flame, to pursue each half. The creature split again, this time into four small chittering beasts with dozens of legs growing from central gobs of flesh twined around with cables. The creatures scattered, each going in a differing direction.

Karn stomped on one that attempted to squeak past him out the door.

Jaya brought her hands together, trapping one between sizzling gouts of flame. "I wouldn't eat them," she said, "but they sure do fry up nice."





*"Twinferno", by Justyna Gil.*

The creature cried out as it died, a high-pitched noise that subsided into a bubbling whine. Jodah gathered more white energy between his hands, but the other creatures had skittered away.

Teferi arrived, panting, at the door, hands held at the ready—just in time to see the creatures squeeze themselves through the cracks in the stone, leaving behind nothing but glistening oil and mucus as a sign of their escape.

The four of them stared at the destroyed office: the smoldering papers, the shattered chair. Stenn arrived, dripping with sweat. He tried to peer around Teferi, then stepped back, bending over. He wiped his forehead against his sleeve.

"Too many stairs," he huffed.

"If they split like that," Teferi said, "then we can't know how many are in the building."

Karn lifted his foot to examine the pulp beneath it. "Interesting."

"While some people might find fighting an unknown number of opponents that can seep through walls and attack at any time *interesting*," Jaya said, "I can think of a good hundred other ways I'd like to spend the evening."

"Karn," Jodah said, "please… just tell us your plan—and the Sylex's location."

Teferi, carefully, didn't look at Karn. "After all these years, Karn," Jodah said, "can you trust none of us?"

"No."

"Wise," Stenn said. "If Sheoldred knew the Sylex's location, she would stop at nothing to attain it. Since any of us could be a sleeper agent, we



can't risk having that become common knowledge—and we don't know how well that… that *thing* can listen."

"You must be the most stubborn, inflexible—" Jodah said.

"Just like some people I know." Jaya sighed. "The least we can do is develop a way to locate the creature. It's doing us no good searching for it blind."

"We have biological samples," Karn said.

Jodah knelt to examine the goop and sighed. "If I developed a… tracker, of sorts, using that material, it could follow organisms with similar tissue. But it wouldn't be some… Phyrexian detector. It would only be able to locate that one creature and whatever it's split into."

"Sounds better than nothing," Jaya said.

Jodah looked up at Karn. "Could you generate impenetrable metal shells around the material? I don't want to risk handling it, but we'll need to have the organic matter with us to guide and power the spell."

"Yes," Karn said. "Do you have further guidance regarding the object's construction?"

Jodah considered, then added, "Put a needle on it. I'll enchant that directly to guide us."

"Similar to a compass," Karn said.

Jodah nodded.

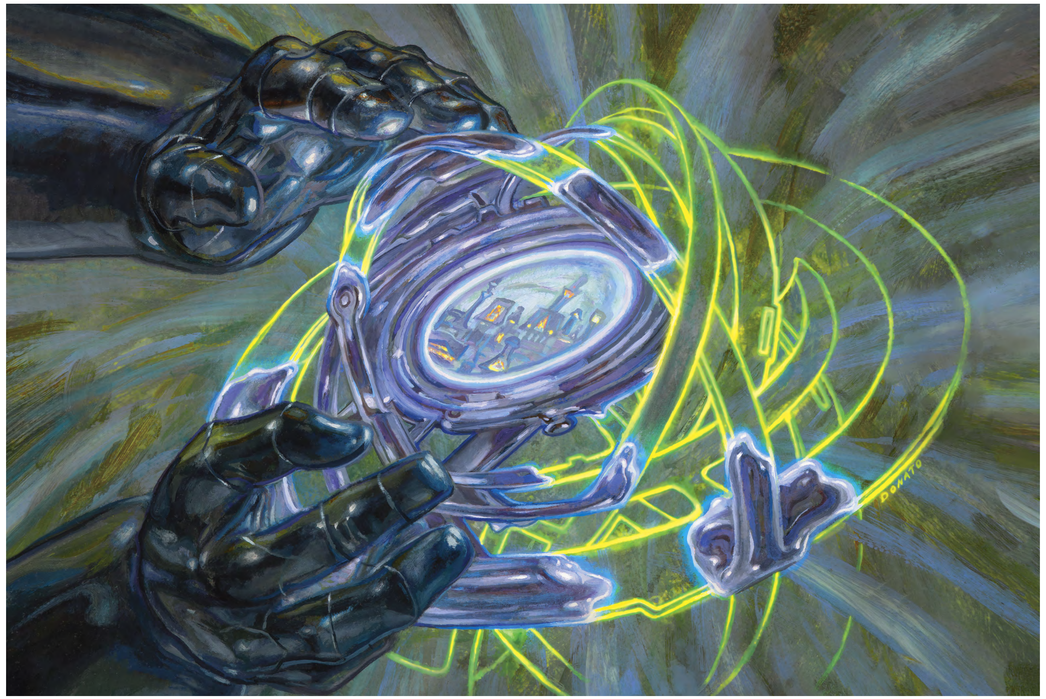
Karn created the metal items to Jodah's specification. He created each one to be the size of a clamshell, small enough to fit human hands, and built it up around a gob of Phyrexian flesh. He handed them to Jodah.

While Jodah grasped them and muttered, weaving his radiant spells, Karn stepped off to the side. In a small nook between crates, he kept his back to the others and generated a miniature scrying device, similar to the one he had made in Oyster Bay but smaller. When he was done he intended to hang it on the chain around his neck alongside the *Weatherlight* beacon. He missed Ajani and wished the leonin was here to help him.

A haze filled the amulet's crystalline surface. Karn frowned. Ajani—where was he? The scryer stuttered, then resolved. Ajani seemed to be fighting. Karn could not make out the shadowed forms that Ajani exchanged blows with, but he suspected them to be Phyrexian, which explained the scryer's difficulty focusing on them. The image clarified, and Karn saw Ajani speaking with a young Capashen knight, a woman with a brash set to her shoulders.

He sought the sea caves by Tolaria West. No Phyrexians searched the coast; the area seemed serene. If Teferi was a spy, he had not yet reported to Sheoldred. Karn frowned.





*"Silver Scrutiny", by Donato Giancola.*

"Karn, I—" Jaya stopped. Frustration clouded her face. "What's that?"

Stenn peered around her. "Yes, what is that?"

Karn hung it from the necklace. "It is not of concern."

"Jodah finished your amulet." Jaya handed it to him. "He's almost done."

Karn inspected it. Its locator needle swung, bobbing between two points as if confused.

Jodah pocketed his. “I’m going to return to checking the upper floors.”

Jaya moved to go after him, but Karn lifted a hand to stop her. “Your long-standing friendship aside, I do not think your quick tongue has a calming effect.”

“True,” Jaya conceded. “Stenn, given this creature can ooze through walls, are there maintenance areas we should be checking for infestation? Crawl spaces?”

“Yes, actually,” Stenn said. “There’s an elaborate venting system to allow air to escape from the lower levels, should the city need to retreat into the earth for defensive reasons.”

Teferi whistled, clearly impressed. “I’ll go with Jodah.”

“Then I shall take the basement alone,” Karn said.

“Better you than me,” Stenn said, fervent. “That room is disconcerting. There’s so much noise from the boilers that you’d never be able to hear something sneaking up on you.”

Karn waited until Stenn, Jaya, and Teferi had left the room. He headed down into basement level, the locator in his palm.

If Jodah were compromised, would the enchantment even work?



The basement level consisted of a short but broad corridor, edged with pipes. Unlike the pipes in storage above, these were live: hissing with steam, their shutoffs cranked open, their valves leaking. The rooms held boilers and hydraulics constructed with intricate beauty from copper and steel, each rivet lovingly set and integrated with Thran technology.

“Ah, Karn!” Jodah entered the boiler room, shouting to be heard over the din. Teferi followed him. “I’ve been looking for you. I think I need to recalibrate the locators so that the needle only points toward the nearest creature. It’s also having hard time differentiating up from down. If you could—”

Jaya and Stenn opened the door.

“Just who I was looking for,” Jaya said. “This thing you made isn’t working, Jodah. It’s useless. Keeps on pointing, then moving, like it can’t make up its mind.”

But Jodah stared at her. “Are you bleeding?”

Jaya clutched her arm. Her eyes narrowed. “Never seen a flesh wound before?”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jodah asked. He glanced over at Karn, meaningfully.

Karn handed Jodah his locator.

"Why would I? I'm not five years old." Jaya sounded insulted. "It's just a scrape."

"That's not what I meant." Jodah stretched his fingers over the locator, pulling up a meshed spell network from the device, and tweaking it. He flicked his fingers down, and the spell settled back into the metal. Jodah returned the locator to Karn. "What if glistening oil has gotten inside you?"

"It didn't," Jaya said, icy.

"If that's true," Jodah said, "then why hide it?"

"I wasn't hiding it," Jaya said. "It just wasn't important."

In the floors above, a rattling—then a boom. It sounded like something had overturned one of the racks filled with pipes. Karn calculated that several dozen pipes must be rolling on the floor to create such a din. "It must be upstairs. Teferi, Stenn, you investigate with Jaya."

Teferi nodded, his face solemn and his eyes on Jaya. Perhaps he thought Karn intended for him to watch Jaya, due to her wound. Karn did not think glistening oil could infect so quickly, and yet… how could he be sure?

Jodah handed a locator to Karn. "Could you change the needle so it rests on a bearing? Or at least something that can pivot? I think it should be able to point up and down as well as in a circular motion."



Karn nodded and set to work at altering the mechanisms. Jodah leaned over the locators. He drew his hands over them, pulling up the spells so they hovered midair in delicate glowing magical networks. He tinkered, altering how the nodes and colors connected.

Normally Karn enjoyed working at someone's shoulder on a mechanical task. It was peaceful. But not so with Jodah.

Jodah leaned back on his heels and pushed his unkempt hair back from his face. He wore a rueful expression, its ageless quality at odds with his apparent youth. "You've seemed… different since your return from New Phyrexia."

When Karn had returned to find that Jodah and Jhoira had been involved while he was away, he'd been… startled. And uncomfortable. Even if Jodah and Jhoira's relationship had not continued, its aftereffects had. Karn considered responding more tactfully. But who knew what a moment of honesty might reveal here? "Recently, the way you offer advice has reminded me of Urza."

"Ah, and I, the ancient, wise, and powerful wizard… may have grown arrogant, over the eras." Jodah pressed his hands into the spells, pushing the magic back into the metal. "Jhoira sees you as vulnerable. It made me feel like I had to look out for you, for her sake."

The needles in the locators quivered. Each swung wildly, spinning in differing directions.

"I would prefer to be your partner in this venture," Karn said.

"Partners confide in each other," Jodah said.

Karn pretended to hesitate. He nodded, slowly. "If you were compromised, I don't believe that you would be so obvious in your anger and impatience. The Sylex is located in a warehouse in Estark."

Jodah laughed at that. "Well. Thanks for that, I suppose."

The needles pointed in different directions. All directions.

Jodah stared at the locators, dismayed. "How could I get this wrong twice?"

"You did not," Karn said.

The walls rustled with sudden movement.

Creatures flung themselves at Karn and Jodah, cables outstretched and mouths seeking. Jodah attempted to ready his magic, but the light around his hands was dim, flickering. He had exhausted himself from portaling them the tower, then again from creating the locators.

A half dozen more creatures launched themselves at Jodah, wet and fluttering. Karn adjusted his stance to defend Jodah. He seized a creature from the air and ripped it in half. He flung it outward at the other creatures. He swiped another from the air. But there were too many—some got through.



Jodah seared one with a blast of pale light, then fell to his knees in exhaustion. Creatures had started to climb up his body, their probing mouths searching for his skin. Even though Karn's instincts cried out for him to watch the walls, he turned to Jodah. He peeled off the creatures, ripping clinging tentacles in the process, and flung them aside. The disconnected tentacles bound to Jodah in clots. The clusters began to grow sucking mouths.

Flame roared throughout the room. The roar deafened Karn. Heat rushed through the room, sterilizing it, and poured over his body in sheets. It felt pleasant, warm and ticklish. The flames poured forward and licked at Jodah, gently. The creatures lodged on his body bubbled.

Karn reached forward and this time was able to remove the remaining clinging creatures one at a time. The limbs drooped free. He pulled the rest from Jodah's prone body, then turned to face their rescuer: Jaya. Her fire centered around her, white-hot, and illuminated her face. Its light cast the lines worn into her skin into relief, and the heat rippling the air caused her white hair to lash around her. Her eyes reflected the firelight. She smiled, her lips tight.

Stenn ran into the room. Jaya's blast wrapped around him, not touching him, but repelling his Phyrexian attackers. He stabbed a small creature crab-skittering around the floor, pinning it. It writhed, legs outstretched and twitching, and he used a dagger to bisect it.

"He okay?" Jaya nodded at Jodah.

"Yes," Karn said. "The good news is that your locators appear to be working correctly."

Karn peered over at the locators. They pointed upward, but their needles did not quiver with tension as they had in the moments before the attack. He picked up his locator, then turned to the walls, to see how the Phyrexian creatures had crept up on them. He could find no hints as to how so many had approached undetected. Inside the walls, Thran technology glistened, gold. It probably connected to the powerstone and powered the hydraulics.

"What a relief." Jodah's laugh turned into a cough.

"Where's Teferi?" Stenn asked. "You'd think he would have heard the commotion."

The silence descended into discomfort. What if this mass attack had been but a distraction, so that Teferi could try to transmit the Sylex's location to the Phyrexians? What if the Phyrexians even now searched Tolaria West, laying waste to its coast? Karn wished to look in his scryer but dared not give his advantage away.



"I'll go look for him," Jaya said.

Karn moved to join her, placing himself at her side. Perhaps he would have an opportunity to examine his scryer. "And I as well."

Stenn crouched near Jodah. "I'll stay here. He's… not looking so great."

Jodah waved Stenn away, weakly. "I need a minute to recoup my strength. Go on. If Teferi is alone, and he suffers an attack like the one we just suffered, the results could be dire. He could be compleated. Or killed."

"And you're too weak to fight off a second attack alone," Stenn said, reasonably.

"You're too proud, old man," Jaya said. "Learn how to accept help."

From how Jodah's face pinched, Karn guessed this was an old argument between him and Jaya, one that he had not been privy to. Jaya waved Karn along with her, and the two left the basement, returning to the rattling staircase. They climbed upward in silence. Karn's footsteps, despite his care, seemed loud, metal against metal. Jaya ascended spritely as a cat.

"Your magic is extremely effective against the Phyrexian creatures," Karn said.

Though Karn could not see Jaya's face, he could hear the grin in her voice. "Have to say, controlled pyromania is the best part of being a fire mage. You do get a feeling for what burns."

"Your fire seems to sterilize them," Karn said. "As if it is inimical."

Jaya held up her hand, gesturing for silence. Karn fell still. Jaya's shoulders tensed. He could hear nothing. Jaya shook her head, and continued upward.

"I cannot believe that anyone with such magic would be a Phyrexian spy," Karn said, though he could, indeed, believe it. A Phyrexian would be capable of any subterfuge. "You have killed more of those creatures than the rest of us combined. If something happens to me, someone must know where the Sylex is, so it can be deployed."

"You finally decided you could trust me?" Jaya laughed. "I'm flattered."

"Yes," Karn said. "It is hidden in Suq'Ata."

Jaya didn't pause. "About time you told me that. Keeping the Sylex's location in one mind is dangerous. Venser's spark or not, no one is invulnerable. Not even you."

She had a point.



In the upper stories, Teferi shouted and both of them took off at a sprint. They found Teferi pinned to floor by a Phyrexian monstrosity that loomed over him like a hungry spider. Blood soaked his robes from a slash in his gut.

Karn tore the creature from Teferi's body—even though its claws, hooked into his flesh, took muscle with it. He slammed it against the wall, pulverizing it.

Jaya ran into the room. "Get down!"

Karn pivoted and hunched his body over Teferi to protect him.

Jaya bathed the room in fire. Phyrexian monstrosities—dozens of them, too many—screeched in agony. The cries died into despairing bubbling, into whimpering, then silence. The flames roasted Karn's back, scorching the blood and guts onto his metal body.

"Clear," Jaya said.

Karn lifted himself to his feet.

"Karn, thank you." Teferi patted the top of his hair and found it unsinged.

Jodah, his arm slung over Stenn's neck, joined them. Jodah seemed drained. He scanned the debris in the room—it had once been an office, complete with filing cabinets.

"This involves far, far more than one creature," Jodah said.

"You're right." Stenn slunk out from under Jodah's arm. "We use a lot of Thran technology in Argivia, and it looks like the Phyrexians have… co-opted it somehow. Integrated into it. The thing's tendrils have spread throughout the entire watchtower."

Karn examined Teferi's wound. He needed medical attention. "Perhaps we must consider lowering the barrier in order to obtain a physician for Teferi. He is gravely wounded."

"Have you determined that we're all safe?" Teferi asked.

"Can he afford to?" Jodah said. "He could wait. He could second-guess himself forever. He could test us all a thousand times. How could he ever know? How could anyone?"

Jaya said, "I think we should eradicate any Phyrexians within the tower before lowering the barrier. If that creature so easily integrated itself into a single tower, what might it do to a city?"

"What do you think we should do?" Stenn asked.

"Go to the powerstone," Jaya said. "Let's root this out. At its source."

Teferi grimaced. "If someone can get me up there, I'm game to follow Jaya's plan. We might as well try."



"I can carry you," Karn said.

Teferi gave him a long look, then sighed.

"It's decided," Jodah said.

Jaya cackled. "Oh, you've been waiting all night to be the one to say that, haven't you?"

Jodah still had enough energy left in him to look annoyed. Karn shook his head at their exchange and knelt to lift Teferi—carefully.

In the uppermost chamber, the powerstone's glow dominated the claustrophobic space, shining directly down into the central pedestal's control panel and filling the small circular room with its sickly yellow light. The arched windows ringing the room were still tightly shuttered with steel. Karn wished he could open one and feel the night's cool air on his body. He found a metal access panel and popped it open. The powerstone seemed integrated into a wire nest, which no doubt connected to the lockdown system, the boiler room, the vents, and everything else in the tower. Stenn pressed himself close to the panel to look. "It's worse than I thought."

Karn glanced at Stenn. He had told each Planeswalker a false location for the Sylex, but he had not yet tested Stenn. He spoke, low enough that

the others would not hear. “I need to confide the Sylex’s location. If I am damaged and cannot reach it, the knowledge cannot be lost.”

“I understand,” Stenn said, solemn. He did not seem at all perturbed. His focus lay on the wires in the walls.

“Should that happen,” Karn said, “you are to determine which among the Planeswalkers you can trust so that the Sylex can be brought to New Phyrexia in order to destroy the Phyrexians at their center. I hesitate to ask this, as it would involve asking a Planeswalker to sacrifice themselves to repair my mistake…”

“It would be an immense responsibility,” Stenn said.

Karn pretended reluctance, then spoke. “I concealed it in the ruins of Trokair, on Sarpadia.”

“That’s all I needed,” Stenn said. His voice, a sudden hiss, sounded horribly familiar.

Stenn threw his robes from his shoulders. Surgery lines, previously invisible, deepened in his skin. The buttons on his shirt popped free as his chest seemed to swell and swell—only to burst, butterflying open, ribs splayed. Iron cords poured from his torso’s cavity rather than intestines, weeping mucus and blood. His face, before all this horror, seemed ecstatic—as if he had finally found his purpose and fulfilled it. He raised his



head, his eyes focused upward, his lips moving as in prayer. Hand-like claws emerged from his eyes and reached around his skull, to grip it. His metallic intestines slithered across the floor, hooking into the Thran powerstone, and his entire body stiffened. The powerstone’s light throbbed, then dimmed, as Stenn consumed its energy. His mouth gaped, frozen in a voiceless whisper.

He had converted his entire body into an antenna, Karn realized, and transmitted his hard-won knowledge to Sheoldred, confiding in her the Sylex’s location.

Its false location.

“Stop him,” Teferi grunted. He clutched at his gut wound, and his eyes brightened with anger. “Don’t let him—”

Jaya lunged forward, her hands outthrust. Fire blazed.

Stenn did not spare her a glance. His bloody wires reared up from the ground, debris sticking to their gore, and wrapped themselves around her like anacondas, binding her hands and pinning them to her sides. Jaya, unable to use her magic without searing herself, struggled against Stenn to free her hands. But she couldn’t breathe. Her face blued.

Karn charged toward her. Fast as he tore fibers away from her body, more writhed into place. Small tight lines threaded themselves between his fingers, defying him. Jaya's eyes seemed so wide, so panicked.

Teferi sat up and readied his magic, but his spell, cast in such a weakened state, did little more than flicker into a nebulous blue haze before fading. Teferi moaned and sagged back onto the floor. The blood soaking his garments deepened in color as it wicked through the cloth. Jodah ran to Teferi's side, muttering a healing spell under his breath.

"We have to get out of here!" Jodah shouted.

Karn agreed. The control panel had a straightforward layout. He inserted the key Stenn had given him into the pedestal. He opened up a metal lid, then flipped the toggle. The steel shutters jolted upward, the chain within the walls rattled, and gears ground. Cool night air poured into the tower. But along with that fresh air came noises: gibbering and shrieks, from the city below.

Karn could not free Jaya from the cables writhing around her, so he turned. He dismembered Stenn—no, not Stenn, the Phyrexian who had killed Stenn, who had compleated him and taken his place—with efficiency. He tried not to think about his actions: he removed bones from sockets, and tossed the pieces aside, as easily as stripping a chicken at a banquet.



Jaya inhaled, her breath a rasp that carried through the dark, and then blasted not-Stenn with a gout of scarlet flame. The fire poured over Karn and sizzled across not-Stenn's flesh, frying his organic components.

The Phyrexian sagged to the floor, a collection of blackened metal and crisped organics. Jodah looked up at Jaya. His hands lay outstretched over Teferi's stomach. "I'm too exhausted to heal him. I can keep him from bleeding out, but that's about it. We need help."

"It is time that I call the *Weatherlight*," Karn said.

"Why don't we give it a few more minutes? Until things are really desperate?" Jaya said.

Karn opened the summoning amulet like a locket. He flipped the toggle inside.

Shanna's voice, quiet and tinny, piped up. "What is it, Ajani?"

"This is Karn. Jodah, Teferi, Jaya and I need to be brought to safety. Teferi is wounded."

There was a pause from the other end. "Your location?"

"Argivia. In the watchtower. Under attack by Phyrexians."

“Phyrexians?” Karn could hear the *Weatherlight* creaking in the winds. When she spoke again, her voice sounded calm and determined: “You’re in luck—we’re not far. If the winds favor us we’ll be there soon.”

“Understood.”

“See you soon. Shanna out.”

The Phyrexian noises seemed to be getting closer—echoing through the vents, between the walls, squeaks and burbles punctuated mechanical clicks and fleshy rustles. The entire tower was infested—perhaps even the entire city was. Stenn had been in charge of rooting out Phyrexian agents in Argivia. It was fair to assume he had done the exact opposite.

“Teferi is too wounded to move. We must hold out until Shanna arrives,” said Karn. “Jaya, you seem to be in the best shape among us. You will lead. I will take up a central position as I must defend Teferi. Jodah, keep watch at the rear.”

Jodah opened his mouth. Jaya lit two fireballs in her hands. She weighed them and raised her eyebrows at Jodah. Jodah, abashed, closed his mouth.

After a moment, he spoke, mild: “I was going to say that this is an excellent plan.”

# EPISODE IV
# A Brutal Blow

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JODAH JOURNEYS TO THE REMOTE JUNGLES
OF YAVIMAYA TO RALLY A RECLUSIVE ALLY.
MEANWHILE, JAYA AND AJANI JOIN DANITHA CAPASHEN.

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*"Join Forces", by Aurore Folny.*

Being on the *Weatherlight's* deck made Karn nostalgic. Even though a different crew scrambled along its rigging, laughed as they worked on the deck, and tinkered with its shining mechanisms, the scents and sounds felt comfortably eternal. Golden light scattered among the white clouds below and glistened on the beeswaxed decks. Blue skies stretched until the horizon. The sea breeze chilled his metal body. Only hours before, the four of them—Teferi, Jaya, Jodah, and Karn himself—had been pulled from the upper floor of Argive's watchtower one by one, dangling from a rope ladder like insects above the vast city below.

"Shanna is waiting," Jodah said. "We must set the *Weatherlight's* course."

Karn nodded, and Jaya fell into step beside them, her white hair streaming out behind her like a pennant. They entered the stateroom. Shanna stood near an oval table, her arms crossed over her burnished leather breastplate. Arvad, his already white skin sickly with his vampire's pallor, hung back in the shadows behind her. Teferi lay on a nearby cot, his eyes closed. Raff had pulled up a three-legged stool beside him. He'd splayed his hands over Teferi's gut wound and his magic's silvery sheen wafted from his palms like heat waves. Slimefoot joined them, mushroom-like pups cavorting around its base. Tiana squeezed her wings in tight to her body to fit through the door.



Shanna put out a fruit bowl Karn had thought to be ornamental and sat down. "I might be the captain, Karn, but you're setting the course. Tell me where the *Weatherlight* flies."

"We must force the Phyrexians into open warfare," Karn said, "before they gain in strength and convert more populations. We will do this by baiting them with the three things the Phyrexians want more than anything else: the Sylex, the Mana Rig, and… me."

Jodah looked to Karn, worry brightening his eyes. "It's a risky plan. Defeat would mean losing Dominaria's most precious artifacts—and you, Karn. I don't like the idea of you in such danger."

"I like some risk," Jaya said. "If we draw them out, if we win, we kill the Phyrexians at the root. They're like ivy: you have to pull it early. Once it's established, it'll spread."

"If the events at Argivia have taught us anything," Karn said, "it is that our forces are stronger together than apart. Phyrexian tactics rely on dividing us, on the secret work the sleeper agents can perform in the shadows. If we are separate, we are vulnerable. Together, less so."

"Still," Jodah said, "our allies are stretched across all Dominaria. With Argivia fallen, the most powerful armed force on this continent is no longer ours—it is theirs. We have to recruit all the allies we can to make our stand."

"So we split up," Jaya said. "We recruit allies and bring them to the Mana Rig."

The crew from the *Weatherlight* had been quiet during this discussion, but now Raff sighed. The magic faded from his fingers. He looked up at Karn. "My sister will fight for you."

"I'll seek out Danitha," Jaya decided.

"Yavimaya's been attacked as well," Jodah said. "The elves will help us. I can go to them, to recruit them to fight at our side."

"I will go to the Mana Rig directly," Karn said, "to speak to Jhoira. I am the only one who has read and can remember the key I found to the Sylex. I need to record that information for others to examine."

Teferi roused from his stupor. "I'll go with you, Karn. I need time to recover, and I can also recruit our Shivan allies while the Mana Rig and the Sylex occupy you."

"You do not have good luck," Karn said, regarding Teferi's wounds.

"I think I have excellent luck," Teferi said. "I survived, didn't I?"

"If we split up," Jaya said, her hair gusting around her face, "how will we tell if any of us have been compromised? Stenn didn't even know he was one of them."



"The scryer has difficulty focusing on Phyrexians," Karn said. "If I cannot view you, I will assume you have been compromised."

"It's a good thing you don't sleep," Jaya said.

Shanna looked to her crew, who had been listening patiently. "It's decided. Let's set sail."

...

The Red Iron Mountains were so beautiful that planning a war here seemed irreverent. Not that Jaya was the devout type, but those harsh jagged peaks with shale cascading down the ravines, white in the light, and the alpine blooms drooping from the meadows in sprays of purple and gold, and that massive androgynous statue of some hero whose story had been lost to time...

Well, maybe she was growing old, but Jaya could see herself relaxing outside a small cabin in a cedarwood tub in one of those shadowed valleys where war machines lay rotting, forgotten beneath emerald mosses and upright sword ferns, inert as boulders. Maybe with some chilled peppermint tea in hand. Now that would be a relaxing way to pass a decade or two.

She snorted at herself. *Not like you're ever going to retire!*

"Jaya!" Ajani strode from the trees' deep shadows, his white fur glinting in the light and his cloak rippling behind him. "Danitha told me you arrived. I have been seeking deer to feed the camp. There is good hunting here."



*"Legendary Planeswalker Ajani", by Matt Stewart.*



"Any luck?" Jaya asked.

Ajani offered her a fierce grin that revealed his teeth. "Always. The Llanowar millenaries remember the Phyrexian invasion well, and they've already sent scouts to join us. Some of the best archers in Dominaria."

When he'd leapt after Aron Capashen, Jaya had worried. "It looks like you didn't recover Aron?"

Ajani turned his gaze to Danitha's camp, established on the edge of a cloudy green glacier lake. Her Benalish knights had set up white canvas tents. In addition to House Capashen's proud tower with seven windows, House Tarmula's flag flew, a seven-pointed star upon it. A stewpot scented the air with smell of cooking onions.

"They outdistanced me, and by the time I circled around you had left. So I started tracking them and encountered Danitha."

Danitha Capashen strode through the camp toward Jaya and Ajani. Her light brown skin glowed with health and her hair, shaved along the sides, had been drawn back into a tight plume. Her armor gleamed silver with ribbons of gold crossed across her chest like Gerrard's sash, embedded with stained glass that gleamed in red, scarlet, and yellow petals.

"I tracked the Phyrexians to a base south of here, concealed in some caves," Ajani said.

"My father must be there." Danitha turned to Jaya. "Danitha Capashen, daughter of Aron Capashen, heir to the House Capashen. And you are?"

Well, well… it had been some time since Jaya hadn't been recognized.

"Jaya Ballard," Ajani cleared his throat, "fights alongside Jodah the Eternal."

Jaya snorted. Jodah collected nicknames like some little boys collected marbles. "I'm here to invite you to bring reinforcements to Shiv."

"Any friend to Ajani is welcome here," Danitha said. "But unfortunately I can't commit my troops to fight at Shiv until I've rescued my father."

"The delay—"

"Is worth it, and if you would like to assist me, I would appreciate your help," Danitha said. "If my father is alive, you'll have House Capashen's gratitude and knights to call upon. And if he's not… well, you'll have House Capashen's new leader in your debt."

Jaya stretched her fingers, pulling flame from the air. The heat basked across her skin. "Well, one sure way to get someone out of a cave is smoke."

…

If there was any place on Dominaria where Jodah felt young, it was in the ruins of Kroog, in Yavimaya. The ancient domed building, its vaulting roof open to the sky, its golden stone draped through with trailing pothos, seemed to hold the sunset's colors like a dragon hoarded treasure. Exposed when a massive treefolk uprooted and migrated into the sea, it still smelled like earth.

"Jodah?"

He did not recognize the voice. A cerulean butterfly lit upon his shoulder. He moved to brush it away, then hesitated.



*"Meria, Scholar of Antiquity", by Aurore Folny.*

An elf stared at him, her light skin dappled with gold around her bright, intelligent eyes. Even though Jodah could not have said why, she seemed young. She wore a warrior's leather armor; scarlet, ochre, and orange, yet unlike the armor he'd seen on other Yavimayan elves, she'd integrated repurposed Thran technology.

"You're Jodah the Eternal?" she said. "The Archmage Jodah?"

Jodah coughed. For some reason, with the elf staring at him, he felt particularly self-conscious about the butterfly lazily beating its dinner-plate size wings near his face.

"Elder Druid Jenson Carthalion told me all about you. Some people say there were many different Jodahs who took your name as a title, but I always thought there was only one."

"I'm here to negotiate with Meria," Jodah said, "in order to recruit troops to fight for the New Coalition at Shiv."

"You must be four thousand years old!" She looked him up and down like she'd look at an archaeological artifact. The butterfly flitted away. Jodah cleared his throat. He felt sized up, a sensation he did not appreciate.

Then the elf sighed. "I wish I could help you, Jodah. Since I was a child I've dreamed of fighting alongside you, of leading my people to your aid… of saving Dominaria together. But I'm sorry. I must think of my people."



Jodah smiled. So this was Meria. Only centuries of practice at diplomacy permitted him to conceal his shock. Seldom did elves follow someone with youth's freshness stamped upon their features—one reason he'd thought it best that he perform these negotiations himself. But then, seldom did elves seek shelter in old ruins, buildings of stone and metal. Dominaria was changing. "The Phyrexians are invading, Meria. It isn't a question of whether you fight. It's a question of when, of how—and the answers to both these questions, whether we will stand together, will determine if we achieve victory."

Meria dipped her head in solemn acknowledgement. "You are wise, Jodah the Eternal. I am honored to meet you. Truly, I am. But neither your words nor your name will sway me. I see no reason for my warriors to abandon their homes for your cause. Yes, if the Phyrexians shadowed our canopy, we would fight—on our home ground, with the advantage. But travel to Shiv? No, I think not."

"The Phyrexians can create sleeper agents," Jodah said. "They can infiltrate—"

"We know," Meria said. "But when Yavimaya allows my people to return, Multani will sort the good from the bad."

"Would you rather that the fight come here?" Jodah said. "Better to snuff the Phyrexian threat now than let Yavimaya burn."

Meria's eyes glinted. She wasn't angry. She wasn't scared. She wasn't even implacable. She was amused, and this befuddled Jodah most of all. He wasn't used to be laughed at by someone a fraction of his age.

"Very compelling arguments." Meria smiled and patted him on the shoulder. But Jodah could tell, as she turned away, that she'd made up her mind.

Jodah had failed. Meria would not lead her people to Shiv.

...

Jaya hunched behind a stone outcropping that overlooked the entire valley. Not the most comfortable position, but she couldn't complain about the view. At the end of a narrowing ravine, the cave's large triangular mouth gaped. Two Phyrexians guarded the opening, centipede-like monstrosities with butchered human bodies in their cores. Their multiple limbs glinted in the sunlight, restive.

From her vantage, Jaya could see what the Phyrexian monstrosities could not.

Ajani led half a dozen Llanowar scouts to remove the guards from the perimeter, clearing out the creatures that lurked in the shadowy woodlands. He'd been successful—so far. No dying creature had shouted an alert.

Danitha led the bulk of her force. Her knights lay in wait near the cave's mouth, concealing themselves in gullies, behind bushes and trees,



in the mossy nooks behind granite boulders. Danitha held up her hand, signaling: *Jaya, it's time.*

Jaya distilled her focus until it was keen as a blade inside her. She narrowed her eyes at the cave. The air itself combusted, exploding into flame. The pine needle turf smoldered, sending thick clouds of smoke toward the sky.

The Phyrexian guards launched into action, swarming through the underbrush. Danitha pointed at three knights, who charged, cleaving the nearest monstrosity with their broadswords. It fell into bloody hunks, each of which grew dozens of tiny legs. Danitha raised her hand again, and she sent another splinter force to drive the Phyrexian pieces toward Jaya's position.

Once they were near enough, Jaya sent out plumes of fire after each segment. This time, when the knights stabbed the cooking Phyrexian chunks, they stayed dead.

"Good riddance," Jaya muttered.

At the cave's entrance heavy smoke coiled into the air. More Phyrexians poured from the cave—well over two dozen humanoid abominations.

"Nine Hells," Jaya muttered. The knights had revealed themselves too early. Their inexperience showed: they fought as if their opponents were ordinary soldiers, rather than interplanar horrors.

A vortex of flame shielding her, Jaya stalked down the hillside. As she blasted Phyrexians, she glimpsed brief horros behind her gouts of fire: a compleated woman, iron coils escaping from her heart, stripping a Benalish knight of his armor like a child removing the limbs from an insect; a compleated child, plunging her wires beneath another knight's armor, bursting him apart from the inside. Danitha fought back-to-back with her second-in-command, her face grim.

The Benalish were being overwhelmed.

Ajani led his Llanowar scouts into the fray, cleaving the Phyrexian monstrosities with his double-headed axe. The Phyrexian advance halted, stymied.

Jaya thought, for one hopeful moment, that the leonin had turned the battle in their favor, until a new Phyrexian emerged from the cave, more monstrosities at his heels. He was human-form, broad and muscular, with pale armor merging into his torso. Metal spikes curved through his pale blond hair like horns and his orange-irised eyes wept black oil across his ice white cheeks. He held up his double set of arms, which merged at the biceps, in ironic welcome. "And here I was hoping some of my





*"Take up the Shield", by Manuel Castañón.*

old crew might be in the rescue party. Shame—I was so looking forward to catching up."

Jaya, despite the fire in her hands, chilled down to her guts. *Ertai.* She'd heard of him, sure—one of the original crew of the *Weatherlight*. He'd been dead for centuries—and still had death's pallor, though some force reanimated his twitching features. His eyes possessed a terrible intelligence.

"It's such a pleasure to be back," he said. "And I have learned so, so much in my time away. Would you like to see?"

And Aron Capashen stepped from the cave's mouth.

...

Karn brought out his sketch of the clay tablet he'd found in the Caves of Koilos, then lost in Oyster Bay. He traced the arcing symbols. Though he could remember what he had found perfectly, he could not make sense of it.

"Karn?" Teferi peeked into Jhoira's workshop, which Karn, in her absence, had co-opted. "I've spoken with Darigaaz, but the dragons are still deliberating."

"And the Ghitu?"

"The Ghitu will not commit until the dragons do. It's council politics."

"The viashino?"

"Same story." Teferi inclined his head. "Only the goblins have come forward."

"The goblins? That is a surprise," Karn admitted.

"They wanted to be first," Teferi said. "They're confident the dragons, the Ghitu, and the viashino will come to fight when the Phyrexians attack,



but the goblins wanted to be able to say that they 'joined first' so they'll be able to use that as leverage in future relations." Teferi lay down on Jhoira's cot. He closed his eyes in exhaustion. Although magic had healed him, he was still recovering.

A screech broke the workshop's quiet—so loud that Jhoira's thinner beakers shattered. Teferi bolted upright, now alert. A second later an impact rattled down, shaking dust onto the delicate apparatuses, ruining experiments. The sulfurous stench wafting through the door made Teferi cough, though Karn's senses told him its concentration wasn't high enough to harm human life.

"What—" Teferi began.

Karn pressed his finger to his mouth to request quiet. He was listening. The *Weatherlight*. Karn left the workshop. Though weary, Teferi followed.

In Shiv's skies—so hot they were not blue but a seared white—the *Weatherlight* wheeled through the sky, draped in the rotting detritus it had been using as camouflage from the Phyrexians hunting them. It seemed they hadn't been able to elude one, though, which circled them like a predator. Unfurled, the Phyrexiani dominated the sky. Its thin bat-like wings had clawed metal tines with too many joints and its body was a mass of fibers. The *Weatherlight* fought it, firing harpoons into the beast, but the barbs fell through the loose mesh of fibers, useless. Magic blinked

across the sky, but even Karn could see that this creature effortlessly outmatched the *Weatherlight*.

But then a small shadow in Shiv's white sky grew closer, spreading two massive wings: a dragon. Even Karn had to appreciate a full-grown dragon: no mightier being existed on Dominaria, the apex of both violence and wisdom. The shadow brightened, glinting as the sun struck its scales. Darigaaz had come to their aid. He turned down, diving, and gained speed, until he struck the monstrosity.

The Phyrexian exploded at the impact, parted into a writhing mass. Still airborne, its fragmented body draped between its wings. The monstrosity attempted to draw itself together. Slick iron fibers wove and interlocked.

But Darigaaz had already pivoted midair. He exhaled a flame so white-hot over the Phyrexian monstrosity that it did not burn: it vaporized. Molten metal droplets rained onto the Mana Rig's deck, followed by Darigaaz himself. People scattered, retreating to a respectful distance.

"Planeswalker Teferi." Darigaaz bowed his head. "I accept your proposal to fight here at Shiv. I will defend our skies—no doubt, my brethren will join me. As will those from the other nations who have seats on the Shivan council."

Teferi strode toward the dragon. He bowed. "We accept the allegiance of the dragons of Shiv. Respectfully, of course."



Darigaaz bowed his head, solemn. He flung himself into the sky, his takeoff an economy of power, and spiraled upward into the blue.

In the silence, Jhoira slid down a rope from the *Weatherlight's* deck onto the Mana Rig. Her owl swooped down and landed on her shoulder, its metal body gleaming in the sun. "That's a hard act to follow."

...

Aron Capashen stepped out from the cave. The surgical lines on his face still had raw edges but they did not weep blood: instead, black oil glistened near the sutures. The lines did look... artful, Jaya had to admit, as if Ertai had carefully considered each arcing cut over Aron's cheekbones, then deliberately contrasted it with the jagged line across his forehead. But otherwise, Aron seemed devastatingly human. His expression was anguished—unlike the other Phyrexians, he seemed self-aware. He was still Aron Capashen, and he knew what had been done to him, what it meant. His lips formed the words: *please, don't look at me*. But he did not, could not, voice them.

"Father." Danitha's gasp was hoarse—yet so pained. Jaya wished she could provide some iota of comfort.

"What have you done?" Ajani demanded.

"Sheoldred has taught me that beauty lies in change," Ertai said. "It's a hard lesson, when applied to oneself. But when applied to others, the beauty of change becomes more apparent, its aesthetics a revolution. Watch."

Aron's face opened along the surgical incision lines, unfurling to reveal that his skull had been replaced with steel, his eye with a crystal lens, and that his brain lay protected beneath glass. Unlike other Phyrexian monstrosities, Aron's changes had a clockwork intricacy, each delicate mechanism ticking and whirring. It reminded Jaya of a star map.

"My father is not your plaything." Danitha's voice sounded flat with shock, but her eyes burned with rage. Her hands on her broadsword, she stalked toward Ertai and Aron. Her father watched her with pained hope—for what, Jaya did not know.

No Phyrexians moved to intercept her.

Ertai watched with fascination. "Aron? Do your duty."

Aron lurched forward. He raised his hands, jerkily, and drew his sword. He lunged at Danitha. She parried, looking startled. His movements seemed bizarre, twitchy and unwieldy, like he was resisting himself. Or resisting Ertai's command? He swiped down again, and this time Danitha caught his blow on her broadsword. She forced him back, throwing him off. His intact eye wept glistening oil as he marched toward her again.



"Danitha," said Aron, his voice strange and distorted. "Do your duty." His words were a distorted echo of Ertai's.

Devastation crossed Danitha's face so quickly that Jaya, at this distance, almost missed it. But then Danitha's lips firmed. Her gaze turned both steely and pitying. "Yes, Father."

This time, when he brought his blade down on her, Danitha sidestepped. She raised her broadsword and swept it down in a graceful arc, separating his head from his shoulders.

Ertai watched all this with dispassion. "No respect for art. But I suppose I can always sew that back on."

He waved one three-fingered hand.

The mountains shook. Stone broke and rubble tumbled down. Sharp shale spun past Jaya, cutting her cheek. She gasped and clutched at her injury. A Phyrexian monstrosity broke free from the mountain in front of them, shattering it into rubble. The roar of rock sliding from its body brought tears to Jaya's eyes. The monstrosity reared into the sky, so large that it blotted out the sun. Its plated body rose, brimming with complex mechanisms and weaponry, perched upon immense, deceptively thin legs. Its head was a battering ram and its tail ended in a stinger, dripping with oily venom.

"Dim-Bulb's stupid horns… that's *huge*," Jaya whispered. A Phyrexian dreadnought. It had to be the largest one she'd ever seen. "How are we supposed to fight *that*?"

…

Meria paused, her head cocked. Birds arrowed through the sky overhead, screaming. She watched them, a frown marring her forehead between her brows. Hoots boomed throughout the forest as monkeys shouted the alarm, and Jodah even heard the coughing roar of some great forest cat.

Meria turned to face him. "Something is coming."

She spun and ran out from the building. Jodah fell into pace beside her. In the distance, tree branches rocked—then shattered, exploding upward in a burst of greenery as a dragon engine reared into Yavimaya's vacant blue skies.

Jodah had never seen a mechanism so vast. Its bronze skull glistened in the hot tropical light, blotting out the sun. Its razor-edged back sloped away into the rainforest, longer than the ridge of a hill, and it waded through the trees—toward Jodah, Meria, and the elves.

The dragon engine's serrated mouth gaped open in a voiceless roar. Its thrum was so deep Jodah couldn't hear it: he could only feel it, like a blow to his heart. The vibrations traveled through the landscape, shattering branches. Parrots dropped from the trees, stunned. Small marsupials fell, eyes and noses bleeding. Jodah touched his face, pressing his index finger to the hot trickle that tickled his lips. He, too, bled. Yavimaya elves emerged from their buildings, scrambling to arm themselves. Riders led their kavu from the treetop stables. One male elf stumbled from his cottage holding an infant bleeding from its nose. He stared at Meria with beseeching eyes.

The dragon engine tore through the rainforest, uprooting a tree.

Meria gasped. "It's destroying Magnigoths. Those trees have stood for centuries!"

Jodah began to catalyze his spells. He could feel the power rising within him, so brilliant that it poured from his skin, that it lifted him from the ground, that it cradled him. To hold all this magic at the ready… It was as integral to his being as his veins. He prepared himself.

All around him Yavimaya elves evacuated their homes, dragging children and bundled belongings away from the fight. Jodah caught teary but brief farewells as warriors told their offspring to be quiet and brave and then embraced their partners before parting ways.

Warriors astride kavu clung to every tree branch, their bows, spears, and blades held at the ready. Spellcasters stood in phalanxes upon the mossy turf, brighter than blossoms in their finery, their fingers interlocked, their

lips already moving with chants to conceal the retreating civilians. Meria gave Jodah an anguished look and led him to the forefront of her warriors.

With one sweep, the dragon engine cleared the ground between itself and the Yavimayan village. Ancient trees crashed to the ground, splintering, the leaf-shape houses upon their boughs crushed. Soil clouded the air, then settled, revealing a raw ditch between the Yavimaya and the dragon engine. The dragon engine had not only uprooted ancient trees so that their roots framed the battlefield, exposing dirt—it had also revealed artifacts from the Thran city deep beneath the Ruins of Kroog. Ground water seeped through the rich loam, pooling around the golden objects. Meria gasped.

"I recognize that," she breathed. "From my studies. Oh, that—Jodah, that is our hope."

Jodah couldn't determine which object Meria meant in the jumble, but that she had picked out one artifact from this distance was remarkable. Little wonder that the Yavimayans followed her.

The dragon engine craned its head as if to look at their armed forces. Within its skull, its driver sat like a jewel, illuminated with a pale blue light. Even from this distance Jodah could make out her features, see the red light of her replaced eye. She matched Karn's descriptions: Rona. Her teeth were barred in a fierce smile.



In an echo of Rona's own body language, the dragon engine gaped its jaw to expose its barbed mouth. Within its mechanized armor plates, the remains of small, rotting forest creatures hung suspended between oily ligaments. Rona had butchered them to restore the dragon engine's bulk.

Jodah's stomach turned.

"Archers!" Meria cried.

The Yavimayans loosed their arrows, but they were useless against the dragon engine's plates. Jodah could feel the machine building its energy—and at this proximity another roar would wipe them out.

...

Ertai laughed softly. He lifted his arms. The upper set had only three stubby fingers on each hand, which he beckoned with. The dreadnought swung its tail around and crushed Phryexians and Benalish knights alike as it spewed venom. The viscous fluid arced out, so acidic it melted trees and boiled the alpine creek. The blow echoed throughout the mountain range, triggering distant rockfalls and avalanches.

Despite the cacophony of tumbling rock, Jaya could still hear Ertai's delighted laughter. He waved his arms, and the Phyrexians launched themselves into the devastated Benalish forces. Ajani fought at Jaya's back, hacking away at the creatures that skittered toward her. Danitha

retreated to aid her troops. She shouted orders that caused the Benalish knights to reform around the Llanowar archers, circling up now that they were surrounded.

"Fire," she called, and the Llanowar elves released their bowstrings. Their arrows rebounded off the dreadnought's legs, not even denting its armor.

The dreadnought stretched and straddled the battlefield. It arced its spine. If it released more acid, they'd surely be doomed…

"Stop!" Ertai called. His Phyrexians scuttled back, retreating into the rocks like so many crabs. The larger ex-human creatures ran toward the dreadnought's legs and clung there. Some knights paused. "Call off your fighters, Danitha."

"Or…?" Danitha asked.

Ertai smiled. He pointed at the dreadnought with one upper hand and the melted slag from its acid spray with the other. He raised his eyebrows. The bristles along his head seemed to lift with pleasure.

"Or," he said.

Danitha lifted one hand. Her knights stopped fighting. Jaya let her flames die, overexertion washing through her. Ajani settled back, his double-handed axe weighed between his palms with more than some reluctance, teeth bared. He met Jaya's gaze and she gave him an exhausted shrug. She didn't have a plan.



"Jaya. Ajani. If you don't give yourselves up to me," Ertai said, "I will tell the dreadnought to eradicate these people. All of them."

…

Jodah lifted his hands, raising his energy to form a protective barrier. The shield rippled from its brightest point, a white sheen that colored the air itself. He couldn't mitigate the effects of the dragon's booming roar but he could soften them—even if his spell, however powerful, would only hold up beneath one blast.

"There. I need to reach that." Meria pointed at an uncovered Thran artifact that lay in the dirt between her troops and the dragon engine. She touched Jodah on the arm and looked up at him, hopefully. "Can you leave that shield there to protect my people while you come with me? Out on the battlefield, I mean."

Jodah nodded. What was the nature of this artifact, that Meria pinned her people's lives on it? "Yes, I can do that."

Meria raised her voice in a cry, which Jodah assumed meant "hold" because he saw the archers shift from offensive to defensive postures,

eyes wary. She nodded in satisfaction, then returned her attention to Jodah. “Ready?”

Jodah stretched out his fingers and pressed them into the air. The spell shimmered in response, then stabilized. Meria smiled at him, her face sharpened with intelligence and eagerness. She tapped her spear on the ground and an intricate Thran tracery illuminated its length. Metal spurs shot out from one end of the spear and a translucent webbing unfurled between them. Her spear appeared to also function as a powered Thran glider.

Meria threw one arm around him. “Hold on tight!”

Jodah stiffened—but too late. The glider jerked them both from their feet. He found himself unceremoniously clinging to Meria as the glider drove them both through the air. They zipped through his magical barrier. It offered some resistance, flexing, but permitted them passage. Hot magic buzzed along their skin, shocking in its power. The glider took a sharp turn, then dived toward the earth. They splashed down into a crater quickly filling with brackish water—right at the dragon engine’s feet.

“Cover me,” Meria said.

“Is that why I’m here?” Jodah said, dryly. But he readied his spells. He could still feel the shield they’d left behind to protect the Yavimayan warriors draining him. This did not stop him from summoning his reserves. “I’ll do my best.”



“Good.” Meria, heedless of the filth, dropped to her knees and started searching the muddy waters. “It’s here somewhere. I know I saw it…”

The dragon engine roared. Jodah flung up a radiant white bubble, protecting them. The sonic force beat against both of Jodah’s shields. He summoned more arcane force to meet and negate the concussive energy; the dragon engine’s roar heightened, then died. Jodah’s shields faded with it, and exhausted, he fell to his knees. His entire body felt pummeled, like he’d stretched himself physically behind those shields to hold them. He didn’t have it in him to do it again.

The dragon engine craned its head toward them. Jodah had the nasty suspicion Rona intended to target both him and Meria more directly with her next blow. “Hurry!”

“Aha!” Meria fished a silver globe covered in delicate golden Thran traceries from the muck. “Found it! I knew I’d seen one of these.”

Meria’s eyesight had to be exquisite for her to pinpoint *and* recognize a Thran artifact amongst the roots, dirt, and debris after the dragon engine’s attack. “What is it?”

Meria twisted the globe, realigning the symbols into new configurations. It lit up. Brightness raced along the globe's equator at a quicker and quicker pace. Jodah could recognize a countdown anywhere. Meria cocked her head. "How fast do you think you can get us out of here?"

Jodah grit his teeth and readied a portal. The effort winded him even though he'd set the portal to transport them only a short distance. But he had already expended much of his strength in this battle. It felt like he peeled open that doorway-in-the-air with his fingernails.

Meria dove through, and Jodah leaped after her. He spun, held out his hand, and clenched it into a fist. The portal collapsed—just in time. The Thran artifact flashed, a bright red light that saturated the landscape as if in warning, and then instead of a boom there was—

Silence.

Between the Yavimayan elves and the dragon engine, a thin film seemed to have formed. But it wasn't a film, not really. On the one side—the side on which Jodah stood—the air was thick with cloudy pollen, dust the dragon engine had kicked up, and humidity. He'd never realized that air had a color: not until he'd looked from an area *with* air to an area *without* it.

The Thran weapon had created a spherical vacuum. The dragon engine stood in the center of it, and it roared—and roared—in absolute silence.



But even from here Jodah could see how the dragon engine failed: the organic pieces inside it died. The mangled remains of the woodland creatures, confronted with vacuum, froze. Inside the dragon engine, tendons snapped, organs turned to slimy ice or burst, and muscle fibers solidified. The dragon's wires, writhing beneath its armor, seemed to have become more brittle. More than a few snapped off. The lights faded from the dragon engine, dimming inside its skull.

"I don't think the artifact is a weapon, really." Meria perched one hand on her hip. "I think the Thran used it to conduct scientific experiments in a vacuum. That's what I would do."

No, Jodah thought. This was a weapon. Perhaps even a Damping Sphere, though he'd never seen one do that before.

The dragon engine staggered toward the field's edge, then collapsed through the barrier. It fell so that half its body was in woodland and the other half remained in the vacuum. Rona, a distant mark in the dragon engine's head, opened a hatch and staggered out from her cavity. She half-slid, half-climbed from the dragon engine's head down its sloping body. The speed with which she made her descent awed Jodah—but then he supposed he'd be desperate, too. She paused at the edge of the woodlands, hands on her knees while she, apparently, breathed.

Meria made a small gesture with one hand. Spear-bearing kavu riders peeled away, shooting around the periphery toward Rona. She shot one glance behind her, then fled. Meria watched the chase, solemn. Her gaze shifted to the fallen Magnigoths. “Hundreds of years of life—lost in an instant.”

Jodah inclined his head. “That’s war.”

“They will find us, won’t they?” Meria said. “Wherever my people go.”

Jodah nodded. Meria’s eyes shone with both anger and grief.

“Then there’s only one path for us. And it doesn’t lie in Yavimaya.”

…

“Why am I worried that you won’t let them go, even if I do hand myself over?” Jaya said to Ertai. She straightened her shoulders. She didn’t intend to give herself up, but she didn’t have another plan, either. Maybe, if she got close enough, she could summon a molten lance to spear him through the heart or superheat the air around Ertai’s head… something, anything that could get them out of this—

A sweet breeze cleared the battlefield’s stink. It brought with it the clean scent of leather and oil. The horizon began to brighten—the *western* horizon—with the sheen of gold. The air gained a peculiar, unearthly quality to it, as if its particles hummed with ancient tension.



An immense but sleek golden ship tore through the mountains’ rubble, rocks kicking up in the wake behind it. The shimmering vessel swooped in a circle around the Phyrexian dreadnought. Hundreds of Keldon warriors leapt from the ship, landing on the dreadnought’s wide scaley back, and they drove their blades and cleated boots into the creature’s hide to secure themselves.

The *Golden Argosy*! Jaya had thought it had been lost to legend. Radha had mentioned that she’d found an artifact during the negotiations in Oyster Bay, but Jaya had never guessed Radha had rediscovered that ancient ship.



*“Golden Argosy”, by Daniel Ljunggren.*

Radha herself led her warriors onto the Phyrexian dreadnought's battering-ram head. The Phyrexian monstrosities still on the ground seemed to realize that the dreadnought was vulnerable to this assault. Rather than sheltering against the dreadnought's legs, they too started to scale it in order to attack the Keldons.

"Archers, cover us. Knights, after me." Danitha charged the dreadnought. "For Dominaria!"

The knights roared and followed, ploughing into the Phyrexians that sought to defend the dreadnought. The dreadnought, beneath the Keldon onslaught, released a moan that trembled the entire landscape.

Ajani bellowed, "Archers, to me! Fire on the Phyrexians climbing the dreadnought!"

Jaya raised her hands. Her flame brightened with her renewed spirits and she blasted the skittering creatures that had pivoted to attack the archers. Ajani pressed close to her, defending her from any Phyrexian that headed her way.

Radha had pierced the dreadnought's eye, leaving a gash large enough for Radha to stand within the socket. Aqueous humor spurted, followed by the thicker clear goop of vitreous gel. Radha hacked through the muscular iris. The dreadnought shrieked in agony, tossing its head to throw her off. Its lower jaw gaped. It dripped blood, black fluid, and pinkish organic matter from its mouth.



Ertai bellowed, "Sheoldred will hear of this!"

"I hope she does!" Jaya called.

The creature crumpled, one joint at a time relaxing into death. The Keldons on its back let out a cheer and then flattened themselves, bracing to ride out its fall. The Benalish knights who'd been fighting underneath the dreadnought scattered. Jaya and Ajani both stared up at the nearing bulk of the dreadnought's underbelly, how it blotted the sky. Jaya scrambled out from underneath the dreadnought, squeaking past its final crash into the earth. The sound resounded in the mountains. Then, after that, the roar of avalanches and tumbling stone, until that, too, trickled into silence.

...



*"Join Forces", by Aurore Folny.*

Karn looked up as Jhoira entered her workshop.

"Hiding out here isn't the cleverest way to avoid me," Jhoira said.

Karn faced her. "I'm not hiding."

"You never answered my letters." Jhoira didn't sound hurt—more rueful.

"You wished to speak about Venser," Karn said. "I did not."

"But you do now?"

Karn dipped his head. "It was self-centered of me to be so consumed by the personal ramifications of Venser's sacrifice. He was also your friend."

Jhoira tilted her head. "Yes, I'm sorry too. I was grieving. You were withdrawing because you were, too. Nothing selfish about that."

"Just different reactions to the same stimulus," Karn mused.

"Ah, I missed you." Jhoira laughed and embraced him. Her mechanical owl, disturbed, flitted away from her shoulder and landed in the workshop's beams overhead.

Karn doubted she obtained the comfort she sought: his body had a similar heat to a human's but he could not offer her the same softness flesh had. He enjoyed her proximity anyway. His friends were so small and so mysterious. He could divine the inner workings of quartz but still he would never perfectly understand Jhoira.



Jhoira patted Karn's arm and then released him. She dug some glittering metal parts from her pocket, Thran by the look of the golden tracery on them. "These will help me install a self-destruct mechanism on the Mana Rig. It's too powerful to ever allow in Phyrexian hands... Karn, it has been too long. We should not have let life come between us."

"Or unlife," Karn said.

Jhoira laughed. "I always forget that you have a sense of humor."

His communicator to the *Weatherlight* chimed on his neck. Karn, though startled that anyone would use it when not communicating with the *Weatherlight*, grasped it to activate it. "I am listening."

Jodah's voice came through, clear as if he stood in the room alongside them. "I am headed toward Shiv with the Yavimayan elves. Meria was able to recruit several neighboring groups. Since we're traveling by treefolk, it will take some time to reach you. Karn, there's something you need to know."

"Yes?" Karn asked.

Jodah hesitated. "There is a spy in the New Coalition."

# EPISODE V
# A Whisper In The Wind

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SHEOLDRED BRINGS THE FULL FORCE
OF HER COMPLEATED ARMIES
AGAINST KARN AND THE COALITION.
WILL THE TRAITOR IN THEIR MIDST DOOM DOMINARIA?

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*"Sheoldred, the Apocalypse", by Chris Rahn.*

Teferi slammed a Phyrexian monstrosity onto Karn's worktop and pinned it with a knife. The creature squealed, spurting black glistening oil from its octopoidal body, writhing in anger. Karn observed its thrashing with dispassion.

"It's the second saboteur I've found." Teferi managed the troops, acting as both a general and a quartermaster—no easy task in the new Coalition, where so many species acted in concert as allies.

"What damage did it do?" Karn asked.

"It was in the food stores," Teferi said. "Jhoira is checking them for corruption, but until they're cleared, dinner is off. You can imagine how our troops feel about that."

Karn only understood organic beings' relationship to food in abstract terms, but he'd witnessed how missing even a single meal could cause Jhoira to become irritable, even when starvation had not been at issue. Imagining that on a grander scale…

"Is this interrupting Jhoira's progress?" Had the creature found the food stores accidentally? Or had the spy given their location to Sheoldred? Karn had been unable to determine the spy's identity; Jaya, Jodah, and Ajani had yet to arrive, and he expected that they would be able to help once they did. Jhoira had occupied herself with setting up the self-destruct mechanism on Mana Rig's helm, a priority now that Sheoldred's



troops had begun to mass. They would not permit Sheoldred to obtain and convert the Mana Rig. If she did, she would be able to create powerstones and apply Thran steel, which was nearly indestructible, to her monstrous creations.

Teferi shook his head. "It's installed, and she's currently linking the cannons into the Mana Rig's power supply."

Pinned and writhing as the monstrosity was, Karn did not know what information it could transmit to Sheoldred. He placed one hand on it, removed the blade, and tossed the creature into a crucible. It writhed, hissing as its blood boiled, its oil conflagrated, its flesh cooked, and its metal melted.

"Your work on the Sylex?" Teferi looked worried. He shifted his shoulders beneath his breastplate. A buckle had come loose but due to his still-healing injuries he could not reach around to adjust it.

Finished. Karn had determined how to activate it. But he hesitated to say so aloud. What if it was not a spy that Karn needed to seek but a spying device, hidden somewhere aboard the Mana Rig? He stepped forward and tightened Teferi's breastplate, glad he had no need of such accoutrements. Organic beings' torsos being gigantic buckets for their organs was an obvious design flaw. "Please be still. I cannot risk harm coming to you due to badly fitting armor."

"It was too easy, to think of you as a thing, while watching you being built." Teferi bowed his head. "For what it's worth, Karn, I apologize for how I treated you in the past."

"I accept your apology."

A klaxon blared above decks, summoning the troops to fight.

Teferi broke out into a jog and Karn followed him onto the upper deck. Since Jhoira's workshop was located at the prow, from here Karn could see the entire Mana Rig. The lower decks looked like a split globe; the two hemispheres joined with an assembly that supported the Mana Rig's legs. Although Karn could not see them from his vantage, he knew they clamped down onto the red desert rocks, fixing the Mana Rig to the cliffside; similarly, the distant stern hemisphere was connected to the mountains of Shiv by a jury-rigged bridge. City buildings rose from both decks. Above him, the upper decks climbed toward the helm, located in an outcropping that overlooked the front hemisphere. Goblins and viashino disassembled food stalls wedged between the buildings and rolled out siege machinery to replace them: plasma cannons hung over the sides, pointed at the desert below.

The desert seethed. The Phyrexians beneath the Mana Rig were so numerous they resembled an iridescent pool in the bright Shivan light. Its surface heaved like a sea about to be breached by a whale, rippled, and then broke as an immense monstrosity arose from its depths.



This was not another sortie.

Teferi roared, "Status of the cannons?"

"Not ready!" one woman shouted.

The first wave of Phyrexians scaled the Mana Rig's sides. Coalition fighters shoved back their ladders, chopped off grappling hooks, and jabbed spears into the twisted beasts.

A Phyrexian dreadnought lifted itself from the horde, whale-like in its immensity—only no whale Karn had ever seen possessed a centipede's legs or mandibles. Stones plinked from its glistening black body and small fibers writhed out from its armor plates as if tasting the air. It lumbered toward the Mana Rig, its mandibles clacking.

"Nine Hells," Teferi muttered. "Aim for the dreadnought—for its thorax! Hold until you're ready to activate the cannons."

Jhoira emerged from the lower decks, two human technologists at her heels. She rushed to the cannons and knelt, checking the final connections. Her assistants seated themselves behind the cannons, wheeling them to face the dreadnought. The cannons accumulated power, their snouts wreathed in burning blue energy.

Jhoira waved. "Fire!"



*"Mana Cannons", by Sidharth Chaturvedi.*

The cannons released a crackling blast that slammed into the Phyrexian's thorax, charring the metal and rocking it back into its own army. Blue energy burned between its armor plates. Jhoira waved again, and the cannons blasted the dreadnought a second time, ripping through its weakened armor. It collapsed onto its own troops, crushing them.

"Well," Jhoira said, "those are working."



A shadow passed along the Mana Rig's decks. The *Weatherlight* soared above, and for a moment Karn felt relief—until he saw it loose a salvo at a cluster of viashino, sending them scattering.

"Oh no," he muttered. Now, looking closer, he could see that the coils and tendrils that had previously served as camouflage were no longer dead and inert. Even its cockpit was crusted over, blood and gore dried into a leathery coating over what had once been shining glass. The Phyrexians had compleated the *Weatherlight*.



*"Weatherlight Compleated", by Adam Paquette.*

The ship swooped low, dropping twisted horrors from its decks—some small as cats, others lumbering and bear-like in their bulk, interspersed with the compleated humans. Sheoldred must be hoping to overwhelm them, Karn thought, before Jhoira finished installing the self-destruct mechanism on the Mana Rig. If these Phyrexians attacked Teferi and the viashino from the back, the cannons would be left undefended.

Karn moved to meet them. A humanoid Phyrexian leaped from the *Weatherlight's* deck onto the Mana Rig, silhouette strange and yet familiar. He walked toward Karn, his doubled-up arms raised. His pale hair, laden with metal spikes, was slicked back and his eyes dripped black oil down his cheeks. He stretched his mouth into a grin directed at Karn. "It's been quite some time, old friend."

It couldn't be—yet it was. Ertai.

Karn had thought him dead. Whatever techniques the Phyrexians had used to revivify him after all these centuries had left what made him *him* intact: how he set his shoulders, how he narrowed his eyes at Karn, how he flexed his hands; these mannerisms remained the same.

High above, dark specks in the blue resolved themselves into dragons, diving for the compleated *Weatherlight*. The airship pivoted and gained altitude to engage the dragons, narrowly avoiding a gout of flame. Darigaaz threw himself at the *Weatherlight's* hull, clinging to the airship so that it



wallowed in the sky. He used his back claws to rake the *Weatherlight's* draping intestinal cables like a cat gutting a rabbit.

Karn faced Ertai.

Ertai opened his doubled arms open in mock welcome. "It's been so long since the *Weatherlight* left me for dead. You all could have come back for me. But you did not. And now look at who captains it—a neat twist of fate."

"Not fate," said Karn, simply. "Her design."

"She may think you're special, Karn," Ertai said, "but I know the truth. Anything that has been built can be disassembled."

Ertai smiled and drew doubled arcs with his four hands, inscribing the dust-choked air with glowing magic. Karn advanced on him, and Ertai, with a flick of his wrists, shot the spell forward faster than throwing knives. The glimmering light struck Karn. He expected it to bounce from his body, repelled by the careful wards Karn had enchanted himself with, but it felt as though he had rusted solid, his joints rendered suddenly nonfunctional.

"I've had time to think about this during my revival," Ertai said. "Time to plan, to redesign myself so that I could fight… you."

"What—have—you—done?" Karn grated out.

Ertai lifted his doubled arms, drawing Karn into the air as if Karn weighed no more than a piece of dandelion fluff. That grasp tightened, squeezing. If Karn had been a being with lungs, he would have passed out. He clenched his jaw against it, but that gave him no relief from the agony that pulsed through him, emanating from his plating. His metal body made a crumpling sound, denting beneath the pressure. Ertai opened his hands, slowly—finger by finger, unfurling his fists, but he did not release Karn.

"You'll be unrecognizable," Ertai said. "Beautiful, and new."

Frost bloomed over Karn's body, a white sheen that coated his metal. He cooled. He could feel the metal contracting, stressed by the temperature difference between the Shivan desert heat and the magical ice. Ertai twisted his hands, a wringing gesture, then drew them apart. The tension changed from compression to a stretching as Ertai drew Karn's limbs away from his body. He was pulling Karn apart, limb by limb, like a cruel child torturing an insect. Karn's joints torqued under the pressure. Metal gave way in Karn's shoulders and his knees, the joints bent and mangled.

What would it be like to die?

Karn had never contemplated it—not as a realistic option for him. Death was something that happened to other people, a tragedy that he inevitably survived, and thought that he would always survive again. He



had no way to fight this, no way to stop Ertai that he could think of—and the Mana Rig was being overrun.

He would not like to die.

Ertai grinned. The pressure intensified.

If he was to die, he would first protect the Sylex. Karn reached into the Blind Eternities, into the hum he associated with its magic, and drew forth particles of the hardest material he could generate. He visualized the distant Sylex, in Jhoira's workshop. He'd never generated material at such a distance from his body. But he forced it, hoping he'd get it right. He spun the densest carbon filaments he could from the aether and encased the Sylex in its lockbox in titanium. He wove those filaments around the lockbox into an impenetrable mass. From this distance it took tremendous will. He focused hard on the act of creation rather than the sense of torsion in his body.

A roar—like an excavator breaking stone.

The *Golden Argosy* swept through the Shiv's red mountains, stone churning in its wake, and drew abreast of the Mana Rig.

Ajani leaped from the *Argosy's* decks, dropping down behind Ertai. In one smooth motion he drew his double-bladed axe from his back and

swung at Ertai. The Phyrexian mage stumbled backward, concentration broken—and with a scream, tumbled over the side of the Mana Rig.

The magic gripping Karn eased, and he dropped to his feet. His knees gave way, and he fell. He was too damaged to stand.

Ajani, his teeth barred, and swung his axe down in a low salute. “I have returned to fight at your side, my friend.”

Karn, creaky from the intense pressures, inclined his head. He was glad he could do that much: he was no longer in fighting condition. “And I am glad for it. We must defend Jhoira’s workshop.”

“Her workshop?” Ajani asked. “What of the helm?”

“Jhoira can hold it.” Karn nodded at the helm, where it overlooked the decks, high above and a good distance from the fight. “The Sylex. The Sylex is in her workshop.”

With a savage growl in reply, Ajani turned and laid into the Phyrexians.

Grappling hooks launched from the *Golden Argosy* as it drew in close to the Mana Rig. The Phyrexians still climbing the sides were crushed as the *Golden Argosy* ground into position alongside the Mana Rig’s stern section. The crew from the *Argosy* threw planks across to bridge the gap, and Jaya led the charge, followed by Danitha Capashen in her house’s colors and Radha with her people’s battle cry on her lips. Keldon war-





*“Heroic Charge”, by Zoltan Boros.*

riors and Benalish knights poured from the *Argosy* onto the Mana Rig’s decks. They laid into the Phyrexians with their massive blades, cleaving the creatures into spare parts.

Jaya raised a curtain of flame and drew it along the decks, herding the Phyrexians toward the *Argosy* and her troops. “Karn! How do you like your interplanar nightmares cooked?”

“I do not require nutritional sustenance,” Karn said.

She rolled her eyes and drew up arcs of fire. "I'm unappreciated in my time." The scarlet blaze whirled around her like blades, cutting into Phyrexian monstrosities. She lifted her hand, fingers clawed with effort, and electricity began to coalesce around her. With a great boom, a bolt of lightning coursed through the enemy ranks. Apparently, Karn was staring; when she next turned to him, she grinned. "What? I learned some new tricks."

Behind them, over the edge of the Mana Rig a vast and burnished viridian shape rose from the desert sands far below. That visage, those branching horns—Karn knew them too well. Sheoldred, affixed now to some nightmarish construct from the ancient wars of Dominaria. It brought her small human torso on par with the Mana Rig.

"Karn." When Sheoldred spoke, her entire body resonated and her voice filled the battlefield, melodious, with strange harmonics. "You have the Sylex for me."

Karn's plan to use the Sylex to draw Sheoldred out had worked.

"Jaya, go to the workshop and get the Sylex," Ajani said. "We must get it away."

Jaya nodded. Covering her own retreat with flares of fire, she backed into the workshop. Ajani and Teferi both flanked the doorway.



Sheoldred moved forward, not so much striding with her many legs as swimming through her army, gathering monstrosities into her body and incorporating them into herself as she went. She approached the Mana Rig from the side. Cannonfire rained down against her iron shell but sheeted from her body. It did not damage her.

Was she going for the joint between the Mana Rig's sections?

But Sheoldred opened the mandibles on her dragon engine body and slammed her chest into the Mana Rig's bow section like a battering ram. The thud boomed through the Mana Rig. From the hull, metal grated on metal, the vibrations traveling through the entire rig. She extended her legs out into the Phyrexian army. Her writhing fibers withdrew into herself as her army swarmed up her body, using her legs as ladders and her dragon engine body as a ramp onto the Mana Rig's upper deck.

Karn hunkered down in front of the workshop door. Why hadn't Jaya planeswalked away with the Sylex yet? Karn's damaged fingers were too bent for him to make fists so he crushed Phyrexians between his palms, cognizant of two Planeswalkers fighting behind him. He had to protect Ajani and Teferi as best as he could. He could not help but admire how Teferi fought: not only with a Planeswalker's determination but a father's. He was a man who'd decided to save his daughter's world, and his own. Yet even as Karn threw aside a monstrosity that looked like an assemblage of human, horse, and squid, he also remained aware of Ajani. He had

to stay far enough forward to remain clear of Ajani's arcing blows. Ajani could spin that double-headed axe and sweep it through metal and flesh alike so smoothly that it took the Phyrexians a moment to consider what, exactly, was wrong before they slid apart. From the Phyrexian army's rear, reinforcements emerged—not, Karn thought, that they needed them: two more dreadnoughts. Immense metal plates covered their cables, pulsing organs, and flesh, bristling with spikes large enough to spear three people through. The dreadnoughts lumbered forward on their study legs.

"Nine Hells…" Teferi breathed, behind Karn. He bellowed, "Ready the cannons!"

"I don't know how we will emerge from this victorious," Ajani said.

On the horizon, a shadow deepened—a line of sudden and towering green. It almost looked, to Karn, like the edge of a forest.

High above, Darigaaz led his dragons into a wheeled dive at the dreadnoughts. Darigaaz slammed his bulk into one of them and began to wrestle it apart, plate by plate. The *Weatherlight* pivoted in pursuit, its bat-like sails dexterous in Shiv's winds, harrying the dragons with sickly green blasts of light.

The Mana Rig shuddered, then thrummed. Karn could feel the heartstone in his core hum in response, a call and answer, like the beginning



of a duet. Jhoira must have completed her work, and she'd woken the Mana Rig. It stood: slow, inexorable.

Everyone on deck—even the Phyrexians—stopped fighting to regain their balance, swaying as the Mana Rig lift itself to its feet. Karn could feel his body press harder into the decking, the airflow squeaking through his damaged joints, clean and hot in comparison the battle's filth. It hurt his dented metal plating. The remnants of the bridge connecting the Mana Rig to the desert tore away. Sheoldred's mandibles screeched down the Mana Rig's length, and Karn could feel the entire structure lurch as she lost her grip on its hull.

The Mana Rig was free.

Sheoldred tipped, her balance disrupted.

The Mana Rig strode forward along the rocky desert landscape, not graceful but efficient, well-balanced, crushing Phyrexians beneath it. It scooped up rock as it went and spewed molten lava across the seething Phyrexian army. Karn could not see the details, but he could see the results: withering masses, shrinking as they burned, soon submerged under thick waves of molten rock.

The Phyrexian army began to pull back—but the dark cloud Karn had spotted on the horizon had resolved itself into foliage and trees: rank upon rank of Magnigoths marched forward, darkening Shiv's deserts with

their cool shadows and verdant foliage. The Mana Rig's lava drove the Phyrexians beneath the Magnigoths' branches. The Magnigoths tore into them—and Yavimayan elves, vibrant as bromeliads upon the Magnigoths' limbs, rained down arrows at the monstrosities beneath.

A flighted kavu glided onto the deck, and Jodah sprang from its back. An elf with pale skin and dapples across her cheeks tumbled off after him. Meria. Jodah had told him of her. "So many Planeswalkers," she said. "It's an honor to fight alongside you all. And the Mana Rig is even bigger than I imagined!"

All around the deck, more gliding kavu dropped down, Yavimayan elves upon their backs. The fighting reignited as the Yavimayan elves charged the Phyrexians, spearing them through and freeing up the beleaguered defenders. Jodah raised a searing white light, enveloping the cannons and their operators in protective shields to buy them the time they needed to work their weapons. Cannons blasted the larger Phyrexians, knocking them out before they could attempt to breach the Mana Rig's defenses. Meria fell in beside Radha and Danitha, coordinating her troops so that the Yavimayan archers formed up behind the Benalish and Keldon warriors. Waves of arrows arced over the Keldons and Benalish, studding the oncoming monstrosities.

"We're… saved," Teferi murmured.



From the tone of his voice, he had not thought reprieve possible. Neither had Karn.

Jaya emerged from Jhoira's workshop, stepping out into the space between Teferi and Ajani. In her arms she held the titanium lump Karn had generated around Sylex. Her teeth were gritted as she lugged it out. It had not occurred to Karn that an object of that size and weight might be difficult for a human to maneuver.

"I can't bring it through the Blind Eternities alone," Jaya admitted. "It's too heavy for me to planeswalk with."

Karn nodded. He passed his bent hands over the case, stripping off its protective metal coating. Then he waved again, and the lockless chest opened. The Sylex gleamed in its box. It alone would be light enough for Jaya to carry.

"Finally." Ajani's voice sounded distorted, not with bloodlust's growl, but… mechanical.

Karn turned toward his friend.

Ajani bared his teeth in an agonized grimace. He flattened his ears and clenched his good eye shut. His skin undulated, as if worms crawled beneath his fur's surface.

Jaya made a noise of disbelief. Teferi stepped forward. No—Ajani couldn't be—

Ajani's good eye widened with horror. He shook his head in denial and mouthed no, no, no gripping his own arms as if he could restrain the Phyrexian fibers beneath his skin and prevent them from emerging. But they engorged, ripping open muscle and fur, to reveal a sleek, dense Phyrexian musculature that had been installed beneath his own.



*"Ajani, Sleeper Agent", by Victor Adame Minguez.*



Ajani had been compleated. *He* was the spy, the traitor. He'd betrayed them to Sheoldred.

Jaya clutched the Sylex protectively to her chest. Still stunned, she took one step back, retreating toward the workshop. Fire flared around her, encircling her. This motion seemed to trigger Ajani. He swept up his axe and drove into her body. Jaya's back arched, and her mouth gaped in pain. She fell.

Teferi raised his hands, his magic slowing Ajani's attack. Karn rushed the leonin. Placing himself in front of Jaya, hoping that someone, anyone, could place a healing spell on her prone body. Ajani swung the axe into Karn's torso. Karn expected the blade to skid from his metal body, but it cut into him deeply, like he was no more than meat. Pain radiated up from the wound. Karn gripped the axe's handle and tried to wrestle it free, but the blade had embedded into him. Ajani effortlessly passed him by, Teferi too drained to slow him any longer.

"Sheoldred calculated your strength well." The mechanical voice emanating from Ajani's throat sounded nothing like his usual growl. "The Sylex and Karn: two of the artifacts the Whispering One wished to obtain on Dominaria."

"You'd—have—to—kill me," Jaya gasped, "before I'd let you—"

"Yes," Ajani said, simply, hoisting her into the air with one hand. "You are dying."

Jaya coughed. "Maybe. But not alone." Fire poured outward from Jaya's body, a white and scarlet conflagration; Ajani snarled and leaned back, his fur burning away to reveal blackened wires and cables below the skin, the air filling with the reek of charred oil. With a thrust of his ruined hand, he hurled Jaya over the edge of the Mana Rig.

Teferi gasped. Jodah raised a frail cry.



*"Extinguish the Light", by Ekaterina Burmak.*



Karn tried to remove Ajani's axe from his body, but his damaged joints bent under the pressure and the blade did not budge. The Sylex was so close—right in front of him, where Jaya had dropped it. He'd avenge her, he'd—but Ajani had been right: Sheoldred had calculated his strength perfectly. Perhaps he'd given away more of himself in the Caves of Koilos than he'd known. Ajani put his arm around Karn in a parody of friendship, gathering Karn to himself. With the other hand, he lifted the Sylex—and crumpled it in his hand, as if the ancient artifact were made of nothing more than paper. Karn could only watch in horror as the intricate runes lining the device flashed briefly, then died.

Sheoldred slammed into the Mana Rig, halting its advance and crunching it between herself and a mountain, the impact rattling throughout the massive artifact's hull. The battle's tide turned yet again as Phyrexians dropped down from the mountainside onto the decks. Benalish, Keldons, Yavimayan elves, goblins, humans, and viashino now fought, hard-pressed.

Karn struggled against Ajani's grip. Jodah and Teferi stood stunned. It had all happened within seconds.

Sheoldred split apart, her small humanoid half popping itself off its massive dragon engine host body, revealing a snake-like spine that she used for her insertion into her larger host body. Her humanoid part slithered down her massive torso and dove onto the Mana Rig's decks. She moved toward the Planeswalkers. Her horned helmet folded back—but it did not

show the gore and metal Karn expected but rather pallid skin. Sheoldred revealed a fine nose, full lips, and large, dark sorrowful eyes, like a doe's. No doubt she had harvested her face from some poor woman, long dead.

She pressed one small, pale hand to Karn's chest. "I have the Mana Rig. I have you. Dominaria is vulnerable to invasion. All the wonders of my people will become your wonders. All our beauty will become your beauty. There is only one truth. The next step in evolution will be compleated."

All around the battlefield, Phyrexians murmured, "There is only one truth." The murmur rose from the ranks, softer than a wind from distorted mouths, and far more eerie.

"It did not happen like I planned it, Karn, thanks to your efforts." She clutched the chain around Karn's neck that held his scrying device, locator, and the gadget he'd used to communicate with the *Weatherlight*. "No, this is *better*. I do have a plan, Karn. A plan for you—and for Dominaria. For all the worlds."

"I guess you're going to be disappointed," Jhoira's words boomed, amplified by the rig's structure, "because you won't get what you want today." A long pause—as if Jhoira had to force herself to do what she knew was right. But Karn believed in her. Then, an ominous ticking emanated from the Mana Rig's central structure. Jhoira had triggered the Mana Rig's self-destruct mechanism.



The *Golden Argosy* broke away, racing into the sands.

"Jodah," Jhoira shouted, "portal everyone out of here! Now!"

Jodah wrenched himself to his feet. Around the Mana Rig's decks, portals whirled into existence, swallowing up nearby troops. The gaping soldiers who weren't sucked in got shoved through by friends quicker to understand what was about to happen. Jodah pulled up a portal and threw Danitha, Radha, and Meria into it, shifting them to a safe location away from the blast radius. He even ensured that Meria's precious kavu would not be left behind, enveloping it a whirling portal. Lastly Jodah looked at Karn. His eyes bright with regret, he stepped back through his final portal.

The decks grew eerily quiet: Sheoldred with her stolen face unmoved, Ajani controlled, his arm a skeletal and charred ruin where Jaya had burned him.

Karn waited.

"I've acquired the targets. I am ready to return." Sheoldred exhaled—Karn could not tell if she sighed with disappointment or satisfaction—and a scarlet light, at first only the size of a bead, materialized in the air behind her. Lightning threaded it as that light expanded into a shining, whirling scarlet globe. It roared with power, eating into the air and environment around it. It grew toward them, gnawing at the atmosphere.

Sheoldred tilted her head and touched her face. “What a shame. I liked this one.”

Karn struggled against Ajani’s grip, but between his damaged body and Ajani’s enhanced strength he could not free himself. The ugly red light engulfed Sheoldred. She turned her face into its power with a small gasp as it washed over her. Its blaze burned over Ajani and Karn. Searingly hot, Karn could feel how it tugged at him, the very essence of what made him *Karn*, and it… stole him away.

Like he was nothing more than an artifact. The object of a theft.

…

As night cooled the desert air, Jhoira and Teferi finished coordinating the survivors: he had set up the triage tents, she had placed the few able-bodied reserves to search the battlefield for survivors and burn the Phyrexian dead, and then they both had worked with the goblin and viashino civilians—there had been a few who refused to leave their homes and evacuate—to inventory supplies, set up the camp beneath the Magnigoths’ sheltering limbs, and ensure everyone was fed according to their need.

They were both exhausted.

Speaking to Jodah… After all that, Teferi did not know if he had the strength.



But he summoned it from some deep reserve. It was what Niambi would have him do.

Jodah knelt on an outcropping, dry-eyed and surveying the battlefield’s devastation: the troops picking amongst the survivors, scattering vultures; the banks of black lava, steaming into the deepening night. He held, cradled in his hands, Karn’s necklace: the scryer, the Phyrexian locator, the *Weatherlight* communicator—and a lock of Jaya’s white hair.

“Come.” Teferi crouched beside him. “You must eat and sleep.”

Jodah popped open the scryer’s back and placed Jaya’s hair into it like a locket. “I can’t let go of her. I just got her back again. She can’t be gone. Not yet. I have known her across lifetimes, and we still didn’t have enough time together.”

Teferi felt a vast emptiness inside himself: he didn’t have enough energy to hurt. He recognized it well—he had retained this numbness after Subira had died. It had taken years for the edges to wear away, to reveal enough rawness for him to grieve. He had mourned her for a long time. He always would. She’d been the love of his life, and the mother of his child.

Jhoira joined them, her boots crunching across the gravel. “We still have living friends who need us, Jodah. What are Sheoldred’s plans? What will she do with Karn and Ajani?”

"I don't know," Jodah said. "How can we fight them without the Sylex?"

Jhoira sat beside Jodah, cross-legged, and put her arm around Jodah's shoulders.

Teferi contemplated the landscape. "We will build Jaya a memorial that will outlast the ages. Her strengths, her achievements, her wonders will not be forgotten. Shiv will become a site of pilgrimage."

Jodah only shook his head.

"I'll stay with him," Jhoira said.

…

The stones rose from Shiv's red sands, an arrangement of white pyramids around an ever-burning fire that hovered midair. Jodah had set that spell himself. In the right light, when Shiv's winds hit it, the flame resembled a woman turning away to hide her smirk, her pale hair streaming into nothingness.

Danitha, Radha, and Meria had all returned to their homelands so that their devastated forces could recover, and so they could recruit more troops for the inevitable Phyrexian return. Jodah, Teferi, and Jhoira had remained to build this: a monument for Jaya.

Teferi would miss her.



"Jaya and I met when she was…" Jodah pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes as if to hide their brightness. He swallowed. "Dominaria lost a mage—the realms lost—I lost—I'm sorry."

Jhoira rested her hand on Jodah's shoulder, and Jodah leaned into that old familiarity.

"I never thought I'd have to do this," Jodah finally said.

Teferi cleared his throat but didn't speak. He only shook his head, unable to put into words how much he'd miss her wit, the humor she brought to such serious tasks. Jaya couldn't save a world without making a quip about it. He had imbued memories of her in one of the stone pyramids: her patience with teaching Chandra, how she'd smile just before saying something really cutting, and how they'd met. He'd never forget the day in Zhalfir when he'd mistaken her for a line cook and asked her for a fried egg. She, grinning, had gone behind the counter to oblige and lit all the burners with a flick of her fingers—much to the actual stall keeper's surprise. "You want some chutney with that?" He'd never forget her.

Teferi walked in a circle around the monument. Sweat bloomed on his skin, and he wiped away the beads on his forehead. He paused to touch the empty pyramid they'd left for Karn to instill with his memories of Jaya if he—no, *once* he returned.

Teferi straightened his shoulders. Saheeli waited at a respectful distance, her jewel-toned clothing flickering in the wind, the gold accents winking, her brown skin burnished and her black hair slipping down. At his *I'm-ready* nod, she turned and they left together.

...

When Teferi stepped through the portcullis, he had to suppress a shudder. They had reached it—Urza's tower. It was more than the worn flagstone emanating the previous night's chill. He never thought he would step into this place again.

Saheeli brought him to an ancient barrel-vaulted hall with its roof still intact, well protected from the sun. She rested a hand on her device, which Teferi would use to heighten his magic's strength and precision. He was not eager to climb into it: with its platform, its leather straps and wires, it resembled a device found in a dungeon to elicit confessions, not a magical item made to heighten a Planeswalker's innate talents.

While the clay tablet Karn had found in the Caves of Koilos had been lost, his drawings had not. Jaya had grabbed them when she'd grabbed the Sylex. But unlike the Sylex, the drawings had remained on Jaya's body, hidden in a secret pocket in her clothes.

Saheeli hadn't been able to determine *how* they described the Sylex's workings. Only Karn had figured that out. But she had been able to



determine *when* the Sylex had been fired—and made a perfect replica of her own.

So this was now Teferi's mission: to return to the *when* to learn what Karn had already determined: the *how*. How did one activate it?

"Good luck, Teferi," said Saheeli. "For all our sakes."

He forced himself to relax. A small brown songbird perched in an arched window, then dropped down onto the floor to bathe in the dust. Karn would have known its species, its habits.

To save his home, to save the Multiverse, Teferi would do the one thing he had vowed never to do: cross time itself.

...

The planar bridge's red light faded. Karn gathered, from the chitters echoing throughout the darkness, that he stood in a vast cavern. He could sense mineral deposits, the weight of quartz stalactites overhead, and he could smell cold, damp stone. He felt ill—wrong—as if the turbulent passage through the Blind Eternities had coated his metal surface in an unclean film. He knelt, his crumpled body still aching from the battle on the Mana Rig's deck. He hoped the others, Jodah, Jhoira, Teferi, had fared better than he, and Jaya… no, better not to think of that. Not until he could mourn.

White light flared, overwhelming his senses. The chittering noises stopped.

Elesh Norn stood before him, glowing as though she housed a star. Her attenuated limbs had an insectile delicacy and her long face had an arthropod's beauty. Her smile was narrow and self-satisfied, even as she scraped a servile bow in his direction.

"Welcome, Father." Elesh Norn's voice was a throaty, pleasing contralto. "Welcome home."

Karn looked around for Ajani and Sheoldred. He had seen the planar bridge engulf the praetor, as well as his compleated friend, but he saw no sign of them here. It must have deposited them elsewhere. Only he and Elesh Norn stood upon this plateau, heaped with drifts of white porcelain sand. Below the plateau, insectoid Phyrexians seethed in a glistening, white-gold mass.

Norn grabbed his chin, wrenched his attention back toward her. "You have been away for far too long," she hissed. "We have missed you. You deserve to share in the glory of what is to come."

Karn tried to rise, but found he couldn't move his legs. He tried to summon his Spark, to transport himself somewhere, anywhere, but he was too broken, too tired. Norn's claws dug into the metal of his cheeks, turning his head. His neck complained at even that motion, the joints grinding



together—and then he saw it. A small, stunted, sapling, growing from the porcelain sand. Its gnarled, delicate branches reminded him of the small trees he saw above the timber line in the mountains. Its pale limbs glistened with an iridescent sheen. Beads of oil hung from its twigs like buds.

Even now, in this hell, surrounded by monsters, he couldn't help but feel a tenderness for that tree. A living thing, fighting against all odds to survive. "What is it?"

Norn leered down at him, her rows upon rows of teeth spread into a mocking rictus. "It is the beginning of great things, Father. It is the beginning of *everything*."



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# THE BROTHERS' WAR

By Miguel Lopez

# EPISODE I
# The End · Part I

THE WORLD ENDS. SNOW FALLS IN PENREGON.
THE GRAIN RUNS LOW. THE DEAD WALK.
A RESUMPTION OF OLD WORK. THE TALITES ARRIVE.

— 69 AR —

It was snowing in Penregon.

Five years after the war that ended the world concluded, the survivors found that nothing truly ended; in the wake of the machines, the quakes, and the scouring waves, spring still came. Soldiers wandered back from far-flung apocalyptic fronts with their ragged uniforms to beg for rice and bread. Merchants traded their wares and dispatched their ships for distant coasts, exacting gold for goods, erecting manors, and tabulating their customers' debt. Guards policed the streets and borders of the high districts, hands on their swords and eyes wide with the same fear as always. The fields still needed sowing and harvesting; thin laborers still shuffled out to gather grain under the stern eyes of supervisors. The price of bread and milk crept higher, livestock and game grew scarce, the wage

one took home from working in the fields did not spend as well, and in the evenings the horizon far to the southeast never really darkened. Life continued in Terisiare, though the spring and summer seasons seemed to run shorter, the warm months compressing into warm weeks, and in winter snow now fell in Penregon.

Everyone who witnessed the cataclysm——that is, everyone in Terisiare——knew the world had ended on that day. Then they woke up the next morning and found that life went on, only it never really seemed to change for the better. The best that people could hope for was that things did not continue to get worse.

Five years after the blast, Kayla bin-Kroog sat alone in the council chambers of Penregon's government house, listening to the warm crackling of the room's dying fire. With the day's agenda complete but for one last private meeting, her councilors and committee members had all filed out to trudge through the snow back to their homes. They left her alone with Penregon's latest ledgers, census figures, and expedition debriefings——a coterie of nightmares scratched out in watered-down ink on scrubbed paper. Jarsyl had been seen to, sent away for evening study with his tutors.

Alone at last. Kayla held a grain report, the numbers grim, and stared over it to a newly drawn map of the Visceral Sea to the east, spread out on the table before her.





*"Island", by Lucas Staniec.*

Empty.

The once-verdant island of Argoth to the southeast was gone, reduced to monolithic spires of basalt stone lashed by waves. The merchant guild had demanded this most recent expedition, hoping to revive the old trade routes between Penregon and the distant kingdoms across the ocean, but the small islands they once used to resupply their water and food were

gone; either the stars were now wrong, or those islands had been swallowed by the sea.

Kayla threw the grain report to the side. She already knew what it would say——the harvests were in and lower than last year, as last year's reports were lower than the year before it, and so on back to when the world as they knew it had ended. The papers fluttered to the floor some distance away near a cracked-open window overlooking the city, where they mixed with the melting flakes of snow drifting in.

Snow. Kayla remembered rare walks in her younger years in the foothills around his tower. The mountains, the alpine forests, the wind—winter had a severe beauty that she had tried to relate to Urza's austere bearing, but she could not. The truth was Kayla hated winter.

Though the steam heaters pumped enough heat that the whole chamber should be comfortable, Kayla still felt a bone-deep cold. Her council put her in a dark mood.

"How distant you gods are now," Kayla muttered. When had the gods last felt close to her? Kroog, before it was sacked. Its airy spires and crowded markets. A home, torn from her. Kayla closed the window. Nostalgia gripped her by the heart today. A hint of distaste to the memory, not for what she recalled but for the pain of recollection; there was a reason for her reverie, due to intrude in moments.



A polite knock from the chamber doors drew her attention. The bitter flood of adrenaline that followed was unexpected, uncharacteristic, and unwelcome despite the previous night's preparations.

"Yes?" Kayla said, addressing the knock.

A young page entered the chambers and cleared his throat.

"Ma'am, your last meeting is here."

"Send him in," Kayla said. She waved him away. "And bring us refreshments, I'm sure our guest is hungry."

The page bowed and then left the chamber, closing the door softly behind.

The door opened again and her guest shuffled in. Kayla looked over to see a dead man. Ragged and wind-chapped, his nose and ears blackened with patches of frostbite, the high ridges of his cheeks peeling where the ice had scoured him. The hale and steady man she knew decades ago withered to a crooked skeleton with crisp, white hair. His eyes remained bright, though, and his voice unmistakable.

"Hello, Kayla. You look well."

Kayla allowed a polite and hollow smile. "Tawnos," she said. "I thought you were dead."

Urza's former assistant bowed. "In a way, I was," he said. Tawnos spoke with a stiffness new to Kayla. In his youth he had always seemed a warm contrast to Urza, an affable man spoiled by his love and devotion to her husband. Now Tawnos was almost a mirror to Urza, even down to his white hair.

Kayla waved him toward a seat at the council's table, to which he hobbled and sat.

"The world has changed since I was last a part of it." Tawnos said, tucking his cloak around himself. "I never knew it to snow this close to the sea."

"The world was changed," Kayla corrected him.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Tawnos grimaced. "But that is past—I have so much to tell you, and much to show." His smile was that of a skull stripped of its flesh. Kayla had seen too many smiles like that since the end of the war, stretched across the faces of the soldiers that returned and the dead piled high on charnel carts.

"Nothing is 'past,'" Kayla said. "As evidenced by you shambling into Penregon."

The door to the council chamber opened, saving Tawnos from having to respond. Two pages wheeled in a cart carrying mint tea and small, steaming, savory pastries. Dinner, for now.



"I was with him just before the end," Tawnos said, taking a pastry from the cart.

"You were always close with my husband."

"He stopped a demon from taking this world," Tawnos said, quiet but firm, eyes downcast. "His brother had been…" Tawnos searched for the word and found it in bitter memory. "Turned by that creature. Fused with a machine." Tawnos looked up, tears brimming. "The same thing would have happened to the rest of us if Urza had not acted. He saved us."

Kayla poured herself tea. "You told me he would keep my son safe," she said. Without looking up from her cup, she offered the steeping pot to Tawnos. "I never saw him again."

"He—" Tawnos cleared his throat. "Harbin was an example to his men—a brave officer, and a good pilot."

"Was his death a good one?" Kayla said. Her voice was even and calm, but colder than the wind that had clipped Tawnos's ears and burned his nose. "If my son was an 'example,' I would hope that he was a good example, and saved other mothers the pain of losing their firstborn to war."

"As a pilot he—"

"All Harbin ever wanted to do was make his father proud," Kayla said, interrupting Tawnos. "He always worried, because he was only a pilot

and not an artificer like you, that his father thought less of him," Kayla said. "Before—when he was young—Harbin would tell me of his dreams. He dreamed he could fly, and that whenever he returned home, his father would be proud of his flying boy. Did he ever make my husband smile, Tawnos? Before he died, did he make his father proud of him?"

"Urza never wished to put Harbin in danger—"

"Then why did he start a war for my son to die in?" Kayla snapped. The anger blazed through her, a wildfire. She flung her cup against the wall, where it shattered, echoing throughout the chamber. Tawnos said nothing while she calmed herself.

"Tawnos." Kayla spoke, composing each word, shaping every syllable from primordial sound to meaning. "So we are clear: I will never forgive you for convincing me to allow my son to go off and die in my husband's war. Your road back to my grace is tenfold as long and cold as the bitter trail you followed here."

"Yes, ma'am," Tawnos said.

"Now tell me what you came here to tell me."

Tawnos reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled out a waxcloth roll. He unrolled it on the table, revealing a short sheaf of old papers,



thick and yellowed with age. Some water damage crinkled the edges, but not enough to spoil their contents. Kayla recognized them immediately.

"Designs," Kayla said. "My husband's work?"

"And some of my own," Tawnos said. "I kept them with me while I was away. Avengers, clay statues—you remember those? Ornithopters as well, all types." Tawnos carefully peeled the pages out of their waxcloth roll and displayed them on the table. "Steam engines, communication towers—ships, machines, and devices he had designed. Most for war, to be sure, but some for a peace he hoped to live in one day."

"And all useless without powerstones," Kayla said. "Unless we wish to create a… novelty clockwork rat industry in Penregon." She waved one page bearing the sketched designs for a toy rodent at Tawnos.

Tawnos laughed, and then realized that Kayla was not humoring him. He coughed. "Indeed, yes, of course, and to that point I have good news. I was able to recover a clutch of powerstones and know where we can find more."

Kayla leveled her gaze at Tawnos. She steepled her fingers, pressed them under her chin. Closed her eyes. Sighed. "It doesn't matter how much grain we harvest or how many fish we catch, men like you will always be hungry. Tell me."

"Before the collapse, Argive had the largest stockpile of powerstones in Terisiare," Tawnos said. "Their storehouses were buried, but in Urza's documents I found a map. With the powerstones I have in my possession and these designs, I could build new machines to go and dig them out." Tawnos was enthusiastic, as animated as Kayla remembered him in their youth. His wild shock of hair and wide eyes, paired with his frostbitten nose, made him look like some creature from a fairytale—wild, if not almost grotesque.

"No weapons, only tools," Tawnos said. "We can use the stones to power automatons that will help us mine and harvest. We can use them to light the city at night, or power heaters to keep the cold at bay." Tawnos leaned forward, reaching toward Kayla. "We could rebuild Penregon. Your guards told me when I arrived that any who saw the light of Penregon was welcome in this city." Tawnos pointed across the room toward Penregon's walls. Kayla knew he was speaking of the lighthouse overlooking the harbor. "I would offer my knowledge and these plans to spread that light across Terisiare."

Kayla did not answer, nor did she take Tawnos's hands.

The first year after the cataclysm was a year of tumult. In Penregon, the blast caused terrible earthquakes that leveled most of the city's stone and brick buildings, collapsing them on top of their occupants. The king and his court, sheltering in the Lion's Hall—the mighty citadel perched on the



vertiginous cliffs overlooking Penregon Harbor—collapsed into the sea. Massive tidal waves followed, pounding the coastal districts, scouring the city streets, scraping them clean of rubble and survivors.

When the shaking stopped and the water receded, Kayla bin-Kroog was one of the few nobles left alive. As the wife of the alliance's leader and a princess herself, rule of the city fell to her. Six long years later and she was still the shepherd of Penregon, the city of remains.

"You sound like my husband," Kayla finally said. "All he wanted to do was make the world a better place."

"If I may," Tawnos said. "He did ask me to relay a message to you."

Kayla arched an eyebrow.

"He asked me to tell you to, ah," Tawnos sipped his own tea. "To 'remember him not as he was, but as he tried to be.'"

Kayla laughed, a sharp, crystalline sound that held in it the breaking of her voice. For a moment Tawnos thought it was a genuine laugh, but that moment vanished as soon as Kayla spoke.

"Does he think I am still the little princess he won?" Kayla said. "All he ever tried to be—all he and his brother ever tried to be—were princes of the world." Kayla pointed at Tawnos. "You knew that then as well

as I do now; through our whole marriage, you spent more time by his side than I did."

Tawnos remained silent.

"My husband and his brother forced cruel choices on their people," Kayla said. "They burned the world down because neither of them could talk to one another." She reached across the table and picked up one of Tawnos's designs. An upright automaton, one of the war-forms she remembered Urza designing after the sack and ruin of Kroog. Kayla looked at her husband's precise script. His perfectly drawn lines. The machine, rendered in old ink on fine paper, looked as if it could walk off the page if one were to utter its activation command.

"Now we must rebuild from those brothers' ashes," she said, setting the page down. "Look at me, Tawnos."

Tawnos did as he was commanded. Tears tracked down his weathered cheeks.

"Stop crying," Kayla said. "You and me and everyone else lived in the shadow of my husband and his brother. Terisiare was stripped of everything by their war. I lost my father, my son, and my kingdom. Every good and kind thing that made up my life I lost because of him." She gestured around the room—the peeling wallpaper, the gurgling steam pipes. The snow that still fell outside. "I don't relish my husband's death. There has



been enough death. But I am happy that he is gone, and I do not forgive him for what he did. I will not remember him as he wanted to be remembered. I will remember him as he was." Kayla's voice was firm as iron. She saw something in the slump of Tawnos's shoulders—a hesitation, distinct from the sinking of his spirit. "Tawnos?" She asked. "What are you not telling me?"

Tawnos chewed his wind-chapped bottom lip. Tears welled again, but he blinked them away. "Urza is not dead, ma'am."

The pulse at Kayla's temple quickened, and the clench of her jaw could have cracked stone. For Tawnos, who only ever knew Kayla as the bright and lovely princess of Kroog, the iron in the woman who sat across from him was terrifying. Urza had ruined the world, but the one he hurt most was Kayla bin-Kroog.

"What?" The anger in Kayla's voice was honed to a needle's precision.

"He's not dead," Tawnos said. "He has become… something else."

"Is that 'something else' a better man?"

"I'm—I'm not sure what he has become," Tawnos admitted, dropping his gaze. Slowly, he stood and began to scrape together his loose papers, tucking them back into the roll.

"What are you doing?"

Tawnos stopped. “Leaving, ma’am.”

Kayla shook her head. “No, Tawnos. Sit. Please.”

Tawnos sat.

“We recovered what we could of my husband’s factories after the blast,” Kayla said. “Machines, chassis, stones—the things he used to build his automatons in great number. No one here knows how to use them, but with your arrival it seems that has changed.” Kayla gathered her small items and walked Tawnos to the door. “Tomorrow I will have Myrel, my scout captain, take you to the warehouses so you can begin.”

“Thank you, Kayla,” Tawnos said, pausing at the door.

Kayla’s lips thinned, offering not even a ghost of a smile. “A long road, Tawnos,” she said. “Go. It is cold.”

Tawnos left, following the waiting page into the candle-lit darkness, leaving Kayla alone once more.

...

Spring arrived months later and Penregon became a living city once more. The jagged summits of the Kher Ridges could be seen piercing the range’s ever-present shroud of mist, their horns white with the winter’s snow. Downslope, new growth stood between the root stumps that were



once ancient forests, harvested during the war for fuel and coal. Streams, swollen with snowmelt, tumbled down the mountains, spilling into the fields outside of Penregon where they filled the old defensive trenches, creating new, thin, regimented lakes. Those old battle lines, once a hellish panorama of stone, metal, and fire-stripped earth, were now oceans of grass across which sprays of delicate wildflowers bloomed. Under the flowers, the numberless dead lay unknown but never forgotten. Birds flocked, roosting in the old and decaying communications towers Urza once erected, all those years ago.

Near the base of the Khers and out in the marches to the south of Penregon, barren sores marked the earth where the worst of the war’s machines had died. Large, corroded hulks listed in pools of dark water, slick with horribly mutated lichens that dripped and never froze.

No songbirds made their winter homes inside these machine corpses. No beasts drank from the oil-slick water. A stink simmered the air around them, and Penregon’s scouts were careful to mark a perimeter around any such remains they came across in their ranging.

Kayla paced along the top of Penregon’s new inland wall with Tawnos at her side, looking over the parapet at the work being done along this part of the city’s fortifications. Hundreds of laborers worked to fill in the gaps in the old stone wall, whole sections of which had slid into Penregon’s ancient moat when the earth shook during the cataclysm. The wall,

once a mighty testament to the skill of Penregon's engineers, had tumbled in minutes. Its reconstruction was of low priority until winter started to wane. This spring would bring more than warm weather and flowers: another danger threatened Penregon.



*"Kayla's Reconstruction", by Nicholas Elias.*

A detachment of long-range scouts had returned to the city in the early hours of the morning. Kayla, expecting their arrival, met them at the wall to hear their report. Tawnos had been closing out the late shift at his factory and had hurried to answer her summons. The small group atop the earthworks were a motley collection: Kayla in trousers and a padded coat against the cold, Tawnos in his foundry apron, and scout captain Myrel in their muddy uniform under a dark poncho. Myrel had returned from the field this morning, and still wore a cloth-wrapped cuirass and sword.



"How many?" Kayla asked her captain.

"My best assumption is ten thousand," Myrel said. "The front of the march had reached the foothills before the tail had broken camp, but the column was narrow, no more than five abreast."

"And how many warriors?"

"There did not appear to be a distinction, ma'am," Myrel said. "Most of them carried something: a club, a spear, old armor-breakers and anti-mech pikes from the war. Around two or three hundred mounted riders." Myrel shrugged. "It's not a professional army, but there were many dressed in armor. I saw old Fallaji armor, Korlisian cuirasses, Argivian plate, even some in Yotian mail. It is as you thought—they're organized, but not regimented."

Kayla watched the construction below. Laborers and engineers worked alongside some of the earliest models of Tawnos's civil automatons, dragging massive tumbled but salvageable stone blocks from the flooded moat via pulleys. Other teams hauled previously salvaged blocks, fresh

timber, and baskets of gravel and earth to the breaches in the wall, filling the gaps. This labor stretched all along the inland wall of Penregon, per Kayla's orders. Slow work over the last year, though with the addition of Tawnos's new automata the repairs had picked up speed.

"My crews should finish the wall by month's end," Tawnos said, as if listening to Kayla's thoughts.

"The city depends on this work," Kayla said. "Let the council know what you need to get this done. Captain Myrel," Kayla said, turning to her scout captain. "Did the march show any colors?"

"They flew flags of both sides," Myrel said. "Though the most common was a plain black banner. They also hoisted machine remains."

"'Remains'?" Tawnos asked.

"Automaton parts," Myrel said. They grimaced. "As well as the Red Woman's creations, carried in cages or bound up with wire."

"Transmogrants," Tawnos said. "Ashnod's hideous work."

Kayla knew the name, though only in passing. Some woman who worked for Mishra during the war—his torturer, when he had been captured. His lover as well, if rumors carried truth.



"Tawnos," Kayla called the old artificer's attention. "The automatons—your civils. Can they be converted to the defense of Penregon?"

Tawnos furrowed his brow. "You mean, 'can they fight'?"

"Yes."

"They can. With some time, I could repurpose the civils to wield weapons." He hesitated. "Should I?"

"Not just yet," Kayla said. "Though be ready."

"I will set my artificers to the task."

"Captain?" Kayla said to Myrel. "See that you and your scouts get rest. Come tomorrow, I want steady eyes on this column and daily reports on their movement. We need to know if they are bound for Penregon or elsewhere." Kayla looked to the mountains to the south. Behind those wintered summits, the march gathered. Within a month the passes would thaw, and surely the ragged march would come upon Penregon's walls soon after.

For the first time in years Kayla felt more than the dull ache of reconstruction's heavy burden. What she felt was sharper, more bitter. The feeling roused her from bed this morning well before dawn, though she had only slept for an hour at most: fear.

...

Two months later the shambolic march tromped through the muddy fields outside of Penregon, the sound of their passing a low rumble of boots, horses, and long cart trains. Instead of road dust, distant shouting rose above the column, the conflict of many songs and cadence chants all competing to be the march's voice. The hollering and braying of human and beast, voices raised in prayer or anguish, hunger or protest, joy or—to Kayla's ears—meaningless utterance. It was the sound of delirium, pandemonium, of war and fear and deliverance. It brought to Kayla's mind the memory of the morning Mishra's forces attacked Kroog, how the city of her birth had sounded as it died and became something else: a ruin, a grave, a symbol.

Ten thousand souls had been a sober estimate, Kayla realized; had she scouted the march she would have guessed a hundred thousand. The passage of people seemed endless and overwhelming, a dark-clad column winding up from the south to cross the riparian grasslands between Penregon and the Khers. The march reminded her of migrating ants, how they would form an unbroken thread of workers and warriors when traveling from old hive to new, the queen hidden among the commoners. Was it the same with this march? Who was its queen and where were its warriors?

Kayla empathized with the scout captain's uncertainty in calling this great assembly an army or a migration. With the aid of Myrel's looking glass Kayla saw elders and children, masses of people clad in scavenged



or makeshift armor, some wearing only rags—all marching together in a heaving mass, swirling, organized by momentum. Like the refugee columns of her youth, this seething river of humanity was a creature, a being whose only drive was to stay together and stay moving. After a time Kayla did notice some patterns in her observation of the march: Riders hurried alongside the vast number, ferrying messages, distributing water and extra blankets, carrying those too exhausted or otherwise unable to continue on their own back to the long train of rolling carts that followed the march. These riders kept the great column's course as herding dogs would guide livestock.

"Ma'am," Myrel called Kayla's attention. They pointed toward a small clutch of black-clad riders that had broken away and begun riding for Penregon's gates. There were only five of them, all armed and armored. One carried a tall lance—an old anti-mech pattern from the war—with a black banner fluttering from its tapered steel point, a white bolt tied beneath.

"Emissaries," Kayla said. "Captain, bring a dozen of your scouts. Let us go meet these marchers."

Down from the patched walls and into the crowded streets of Penregon in spring, Kayla and her escort of scouts pushed through the noontime press of people, all eager and hurrying to the walls to watch the distant procession. People shouted as Kayla and her guards passed, hollering questions and encouragement. To be seen and acknowledged by the Lady

of Penregon was enough for most; the eager reached out their hands, heartened by Kayla's touch. She had an idea of what she had become to the people she led—a living martyr, the forgotten wife of the world-killer who, in the darkness of his passing, led the survivors in carving out a sanctuary. Not a gentle place but a safe one. Secretly Kayla hated how the people thought of her: she was more than a forgotten wife. All the same, each cheering person, each hopeful or fearful face she passed on her way to the gates drove an iron nail of determination deeper into her: She would see Penregon safe through any adversity set before it.

Clearing the gates took some shouting and shoving, but the scouts were able to usher her to the front, where the little gate to Penregon—a door cut out in the much larger stone and ironwork portcullis—stood open. She ducked through and walked out of Penregon's walls onto the cobblestone road where a line of city guards waited. Captain Myrel hurried to Kayla's side and barked commands to their scouts to do the same. So arranged, Kayla's retinue parted to allow her through. The black-clad emissaries of the march waited to meet her opposite a patch of barren land a scant few yards wide.

Kayla wrinkled her nose at their stink, composed herself after the reflex passed. The emissaries did not seem to mind. They slouched over the horns of their saddles, leered toward the city behind her, and waited.



"Welcome to Penregon," Kayla said, raising her voice to cross the space between. The sound of the march rumbling along behind the emissaries was an unwelcome substrate, a new background that set the small hairs on the back of Kayla's neck standing up.

"All are accepted within our walls on three conditions. Surrender your weapons, maintain yourselves, and contribute to Penregon's well-being," Kayla said. She looked for who among the emissaries would be their leader but found no relief in marks of station or ornament, as the men wore an eclectic mix of sigils, colors, and armor. Kayla's old knowledge of protocol, banners, house signs—all those identifiers of the world long gone—served only to increase her confusion. She settled on the man in the patched set of drop-trooper armor, assuming him to be their leader by his bulk, equipment, and bearing.

"We are penitents." A man in an iron-armored coat spoke first. He was older, likely around her age, and weathered by a hard life. He had thin salt-and-pepper hair, with a dark beard growing between a spidery web of shallow burn scars. Kayla had seen these wounds before on some veterans of the war: those who had been there at the end, when the machines lashed each other with terrible energy weapons.

"We are righteous pilgrims," the man continued, speaking past Kayla to address the people and guards arrayed along Penregon's walls. "We are the living of Terisiare, who seek to clean this land of machine filth." He

looked at the battlements, panning across the dark stone, staring at each person there in turn. “We have liberated Korlis and march on an iron pilgrimage. We approach you as kin, with peace and a request: that all who hold righteous hate and fear of the machine join us on our crusade.” The man’s voice was clear and sturdy, a leader’s voice, with an edge like a razor. He was not speaking to her, but to the people of Penregon; Kayla could hear his cruelty. She hoped her people could as well. “We are like you—survivors of the machine demons and the doom that their creators brought upon us. Many of us fought on opposite sides during the war, but in the wake of the end we now recognize our shared humanity. Do not fear us—join us.”

One of the marchers in the leader’s retinue, a man carrying a black banner, spurred his horse forward. Kayla’s scouts stepped back, dropping their hands to their blades, preparing to draw. The flagbearer wheeled his horse in a tight circle, hoisting the black flag high, a salute toward Penregon. The other riders cheered, three shouts to their order’s glory.

No cheers followed from the curious crowds along the wall. The distant sound of the march filled the space instead. The rising wind snapped the dark cloth, loud as a whip cracking. Kayla furrowed her brow and read the banner, realizing it was more than just a simple black field. Embroidered on it in a deep blue, so dark it was difficult to see from a distance, were two circles, side by side.



“Lady Kayla,” the speaker finally addressed Kayla. For a moment she was taken aback that he would know her name—she had assumed them bandits, raiders, maybe even one of the western warlords that her scouts had told her now ruled inland Terisiare. “I am Raddic of Kroog.” His voice was unaccented to Kayla’s ears, placing him anywhere from Yotia in the south to the small Argivian holds in the far northeast. “You do not know me, but I served under father during the second Suwwardi campaign.” Raddic said. He spoke with a rough grace, like most commonfolk officers Kayla knew. Her father at his best had been one like them—a man of rough grace, simple in his understanding of leadership and rule.

It was no wonder then that this man seemed familiar.

“You are Yotian?” Kayla asked.

“I was, yes,” Raddic said. “I wandered to the southern Khers after the sacking of Kroog. Found a home there until the Korlisians drafted us for the Tomakul Campaign of 955.” He nodded toward the man in the brass cap. “Met old Arah in the trenches, though we did not see each other again until after the Cataclysm.” Raddic grinned as much as his scars allowed. “After our defeat, I spent the rest of the war in a Fallaji work camp.”

“What a journey,” Kayla said drily.

“All of us living have suffered one like it,” Raddic agreed.

"And what is this?" Kayla asked, pointing toward the marching column in the distance. "Another army, gathering old soldiers? Or something else?"

Raddic looked up, staring past her and up to the walls, as if self-conscious under the gaze of the crowds that watched their little summit.

"I spoke the plain truth, Lady Kayla." Raddic said. "We are warriors for humanity. Crusaders against the unliving and the machine demon." Raddic raised his left hand to his heart and Kayla saw that his fingers had been shortened—likely cut away in some battle. "We began our crusade with a purge of the Gixian lands to the far north, emptying out that wretched temple of oil and machine," Raddic said. "We then marched through the desert that was the old Fallaji empire, then through the ruins of fair Kroog. Korlis followed; we liberated her from a cruel machine warlord and recruited many to our cause. Now, we are bound for the Iron Tower, where the Lord Protector," Raddic practically spat Urza's old title, "once birthed his machine demons into the world. We seek only food, water, and what other supplies you can spare. As well I ask that my priests be welcomed into your streets to minister to the people and call the faithful to arms."

"The 'Iron Tower'?" Kayla asked, ignoring Raddic's request.

"Do you know it?" he asked, without a hint of a question softening his words.



Did she know it? He meant Urza's old tower. "I was taken there once, years ago," Kayla said. "But I could not tell you the way. It is well hidden in the mountains somewhere to the west or southwest. You'll know it by the thick mist that surrounds it."

"Your husband was not a trusting man," Raddic said.

Kayla bristled. "Urza was not a trusting man, no."

"Why not come with us then?" Raddic said. "Show us the way, lend us your soldiers. Come and wipe this world clean of machines."

Kayla looked past Raddic toward the slow-moving march in the distance, that mass of humanity. Everyone carried something—heavy packs, weapons, the elderly too feeble to walk or children too young to carry themselves. The war had ruined so much. These poor people. Kayla did not fear them anymore; she understood. Raddic's hatred for the machine was the same hatred she held, only he was free to follow that burning vein to its bloody end. Kayla had a city to lead, a world to rebuild—not a grave to fill.

"I cannot," Kayla said, tearing her eyes from the sight. "I am the Queen regent of Penregon, not a warrior, nor a storied commander. I am, however, willing to trade. We have goods, food, and artisans," Kayla said. "Your people are free to seek refuge in our city, but we ask that no soldiers enter. No weapons may cross our gates."

Raddic bowed as best he could on horseback. “Your charity will be remembered,” he said. “Thanks be to Tal for your humanity.”

Tal. An old god of Yotia, something to do with the sun. Kayla recognized the name but did not recall any great cults or monuments to the deity; the end of the world shook all kinds of strange things from their hidden corners.

“You quest for all of us,” Kayla said. Polite, neutral. “Penregon is happy to see you along your way.”

Raddic grinned, understanding her diplomatic language well. He clicked his tongue to his horse, turning it around. His guards followed suit. Without looking back, he raised his shortened hand to the sky, a lazy gesture, half wave and half salute. A farewell, for now.

Kayla, escorted by her own retinue, walked back through the gates into the safety of Penregon. The crowds on the wall talked a rainfall chorus of excitement, curiosity, bravado, and fear. It was the sound following a decision before its outcome was decided. Kayla only hoped that she had made the correct one, and that the days to come would not prove her charity wrong.

Peace lasted a day and ended in screams. Kayla did not hear them at first; she was busy in a meeting with representatives from Penregon’s fisher guilds, mediating as the masters hollered accusations of net-slicing and



claim jumping at each other. Fish, unlike other land-based game and agricultural industries, had not been brutalized by the cataclysm; poor before the war, after its end these fisherfolk had become fantastically wealthy. With much of the world guttering like a dying candle, piscine gold came to be bitterly contested by the sailors who worked long hours to harvest it, though no dockyard fight was as bloodthirsty as these arguments over contracts, fishing rights, and fleet timber. Kayla had just thrown her hands up in frustration when Tawnos entered the council chambers.



*“Kayla’s Command”, by Dominik Mayer.*

"Ah, thank the gods," Kayla said. She spoke without worry, as the guildmasters certainly could not hear her over their shouting. "Nothing so sweet as moving from misery to annoyance." Kayla stood and hurried over to her artificer, motioning for him to leave the council chambers. "They'll be fine," Kayla said, reassuring him when he looked to the arguing guildmasters. "They'll have it out at some point, or the guards will step in before." Kayla took Tawnos by the arm and walked with him down the hall, guiding him with the determination of a harbor pilot navigating a treacherous strait. She stopped next to a narrow window overlooking inland Penregon, with a view of the mist-shrouded Khers.

There was a stiffness about Tawnos, a rigidity that turned Kayla's relief to concern. All the same, she kept her pleasant tone—voices carried in stone halls. "Now, tell me," Kayla said. "What is important enough to have drawn you out from your factory?"

"There's been an incident," Tawnos said. "A group of Talites in the market attacked one of my civils."

Kayla swore. "Did it—"

"No," Tawnos said. "No. None of the models in the city have been trained or equipped to fight. It didn't fight back. The city guard, however," Tawnos sighed. He checked down the hall to see that they were alone. "Two



of the pilgrims are dead and one of our guards was wounded. She'll live. The rest of the pilgrims near the area were arrested."

Kayla stepped to the window. From this vantage point, nothing seemed different. The march had slowed or stopped in the fields outside of Penregon, and thin gray ribbons of campfire smoke drifted up, tugged along by the wind. Cookfires and industrial smoke bled from chimney tops all over Penregon. People bustled about their work. It was a normal spring day, though the news Tawnos brought colored the panorama with a sinister tint.

"Did any of their order witness the attack?"

"There were dozens of people there," Tawnos said. "I would be more shocked if the marchers did not hear of this."

Kayla swore again. "The Talites attacked the civil unprovoked?"

"Yes," Tawnos said. "They called it a demon. They managed to damage one of its knee joints, but nothing serious—it can be repaired in an afternoon, no more."

"Fine," Kayla said. "We will try to keep this quiet. I—"

A shout echoed through the government house. A door slammed open, followed by the sound of booted feet charging through the bottom floor. Kayla looked to Tawnos with concern, then to the end of the hall where

a corner hid the stairs to the floor below. The two braced themselves for who would round the corner.

"Ma'am! Lady Kayla!"

Kayla exhaled. She leaned a little against the wall. It was only Myrel.

"I'm here," Kayla called back. She reached over and patted Tawnos on the shoulder. "Composure," she said, quietly. Tawnos nodded, unclenched his fists.

Scout Captain Myrel rounded the hall, out of breath, followed by a pair of their scouts. Their eyes were bright and cheeks flushed—adrenaline, the cold: action. "Lady Kayla, we need to get you to safety," Myrel said between breaths. "The marchers are arranging against the city."

"What?" Kayla said. First the civil, now the marchers. Where was Jarsyl? With one of his tutors, to be sure. She would need to send for him, keep him close—

"Ma'am," Myrel interrupted, calling Kayla's attention. They pointed out the window, toward the distant campfires. "Raddic and a dozen men, all armed—they're at the gates, and my scouts have seen their marchers arming themselves for battle."

"Then they know," Kayla said. "We must tell them Tawnos's civils are not the same machines—"



"Ma'am, please," Myrel said. "We should go to a higher floor. I have my scouts barricading the house—"

"Send them to find Jarsyl and bring him here." Kayla said. "I will not hide, not just yet."

Concern crossed Myrel's face. Kayla waved it away.

"This is my city, Captain. I will not hide when Penregon is threatened."

Myrel nodded to the two scouts, who saluted and took off at a run to find Jarsyl. Kayla watched them go, then turned back to the window.

The setting sun flared warm behind the Khers, plunging the fields outside of Penregon into a premature twilight that hid the black-clad marchers. As Kayla watched, cookfires stippled the umbral darkness, flaring like dim stars in deep night.

This march outnumbered Penregon's warriors. How many did they have in the city's colors? A mere hundred scouts, a city guard numbering less than a thousand. She could order the city levies to be called, but that would put untrained people on the line of battle. Penregon's strength was her isolation, but when she was not isolated, and when a force threatened the city—

Enough. There was only one option left for Kayla. In her youth she fled Kroog and never returned. To this day, her home was a ruin; Kayla would not flee Penregon.

"Tawnos, arm the civils," Kayla ordered.

Tawnos rocked back on his heels—a small movement betraying his surprise. "I don't know if we should do that," he said.

Kayla's eyes flared with the same steel that had animated Urza, cold and efficient. Brilliant, unrelenting.

"I lived through the end of the world as well, Tawnos," Kayla said. "I was not on the front, but I know what I am asking you to do." Kayla reached out and laid a hand on his upper arm, squeezing it. In their youth a gesture like that would have sent sparks shooting through him; now, it was only pressure. "I am not Urza," Kayla said. "I'm asking you to do this to protect Penregon and her people. Nothing more."

Tawnos placed his hand over hers and squeezed.

"Thank you," Kayla said. She lifted her hand from Tawnos's arm and turned to her captain. "Myrel?"

"I have already called the Scouts," Myrel said. "And the city guard has been on alert since yesterday."



"Levy the militia," Kayla said. "Empty the armories. Send everyone able to lift a spear to the walls."

"They won't be much in a fight."

"I know," Kayla said. "But we need numbers. Find those with experience from the war and have them lead the others. They will fight to defend their city. Go." Kayla did not turn from the window as Myrel ran to carry out her commands; to turn from the window meant the beginning of a terrible new chapter, a return to the cruelties of the old world. Penregon was a fragile place, her walls unnecessary for years before today. Kayla hoped that they would become no more than a relic after this: a reminder and a warning of the worst of the old world.

Kroog fell in the morning. The memory came to Kayla with an unwelcome and bitter pang. A hazy spring dawn, the dew still fresh on the leaden glass of the city's magnificent towers. Kroog's red brick streets were still damp from the evening's rain, and only just beginning to steam in the morning heat. She fled the city, pregnant with her son. Tawnos had been there as well; he saw her safe from the city, fleeing with her while her people died.

Kayla turned from the window. "It is disheartening how little the world has changed," she said to Tawnos. "I thought we would have learned our lesson by now."

Tawnos looked up from his writing slate. He was jotting notes on the steps necessary to arm the civils—reminders, orders, ideas. He frowned, his brow furrowing. “With respect,” he said, “I think as long as there are people, the world will never really change.”

“I hope you are wrong,” Kayla said. “How soon can you have the civils be ready to defend Penregon?”

“Give me an hour to brief my artificers,” Tawnos said. His voice wavered in a way Kayla had never heard from him. “The civils are easy enough to adapt—I could have dozens ready by the evening, and a hundred by morning.” He spoke like a man chewing gristly meat—persevering through what must be done.

“Good,” Kayla said. “And then we march them into the sea after this, yes?”

It took a moment, but Tawnos realized that Kayla was joking with him. He smiled and Kayla laughed. Short and sharp. Nervous, but genuine. With a parting nod, Tawnos hurried to work.

“You harbor machine demons,” Raddic said, barking at Kayla as she emerged from the portcullis. Slouched over his saddle horn, mouth never quite closed, the sun setting over his shoulder, Raddic struck an animalistic silhouette. His posture reminded Kayla of the languid way some predatory cats carried themselves—relaxed and deadly. His voice was cold as a dagger’s blade, and this time ten riders in black armor flanked him.



“When our faithful tried to drive the machines out, your guards killed them,” Raddic all but hissed between his teeth. “Can you not hear their children crying? Or does the buzz of your city’s hellstones drown them out?”



*“Military Discipline”, by Francisco Miyara.*

Hellstones? The streetlights, Kayla thought. Last winter Tawnos had sent his artificers to install chips of shattered powerstones in the public torches, ensuring that even in the bitterest of winter storms Penregon

stayed lit against the dark. In quiet corners of the city, one could hear them buzzing. A creeping, prickling realization crawled up Kayla's back.

Kayla had never seen the black banner of Tal flown in the city, nor had she heard any street preachers extolling the sun god's scripture, but she could not be everywhere. "How long have your people been inside Penregon?" Kayla asked.

"Long enough to know that this city cannot be saved," Raddic said. "Many of the faithful arrived here years ago, desperate for shelter, thinking that you of all people would know the danger of the machine. They watched in horror how you welcomed one of the Lord Protector's own into your council, how your artificers labored to bring more machines to life, and how they train Penregon's mechanical demons to obey their commands. The faithful braved the bitter passes to tell us that Penregon stands unrepentant," Raddic snarled. "You and your people are fools. You raise new walls and consume the earth in the same manner as the killers Urza and Mishra did. Tell me, Lady Kayla—why do you cling to the very things that killed the old world?"

"Our civils are not those machines," Kayla said. "The works of Urza and Mishra died when they died. We are building—"

"New demons for a new world," Raddic said, dismissing her protest. He glared past her, toward Penregon. "We cannot save this city," he said.



"We do not need your help," Kayla said. "We offered you supplies for your journey to the Tower as you asked, aid to your people after their long journey, but now you must continue on. Penregon has no need of you, nor do we want to fight. Leave us."

"Cast them out," Raddic ignored her. He called up to the city walls, looking to the guards and nervous militia there. "Drive the machine demons into the sea," he said. "Prostrate yourself and beg Tal's forgiveness. March to the White Tower and tear it down, brick by brick, or come the dawn we will do the same to Penregon."

Myrel started to draw their sword, but Kayla held up her hand. Myrel slid their sword back into their scabbard, glaring at Raddic.

"People of Penregon," Raddic bellowed. "You are not our enemies yet. You who spit on and curse the machine demons, you who reject the leaders who cannot imagine a world without machines—you will find company in our numbers." He reached back to one of his companions, who passed him a spear. "The age of machine-magic is dead," Raddic said, raising the spear above his head. "Choose: die with it, or live with us!"

Myrel drew their sword fully this time, but Raddic did not attack. Instead, Raddic threw the spear on the cobblestones between him and Kayla. It skittered and bounced to a stop at her feet.

“Dawn,” Raddic said. “You decide, Lady Kayla.” He wheeled his horse around and whistled to his riders. Together, they spurred their horses into motion, making for their camp.

“Should I have my archers fire?” Myrel asked.

A cold wind rattled across the cobblestone road leading into Penregon. The fields stretching out before the city, so vibrant at the start of spring, were ground to muddy ruin. The dark river of the Talite march spread across it, their campfires burning. The Khers loomed beyond, gray and stark.

It was the end of the world. The end of the age of artifice and machines; come dawn, a new age would break across Terisiare.

“Save our arrows,” Kayla said. “We’ll need them tomorrow.”

# EPISODE II
# The End · Part II

THE SIEGE OF PENREGON. THE LAST QUEEN OF ARGIVE.
THE GREEN WEST. THE ICE AGE. CARAVANS.
THE LAST WARLORD OF KROOG.

**— 69 AR —**

Tawnos's civil factory was a clamor of human and machine cacophony at all hours. Artificers and laborers of all rank and classification criss-crossed the vast shop floor, pushing carts and leading older civils laden with freshly machined bearings, bolts, modular plating, canvas sheathing, and racks of new weapons. The suspended forms of new civils being retooled for war hung from clattering conveyor belts and slowly moving racks. The regimented production environment Tawnos had designed, with its poured stone floor and painted lines intended to guide people and machines along the safest and most efficient paths, had never seen such frantic, barely ordered commotion. He stood above it all, watching from his office cupola behind glass as his dream of a mechanized peace lifted its veil, revealing its bloody truth.

Urza and Mishra never designed anything but machines meant to kill. Tawnos could not speak for Mishra's tutelage, but Urza had been a teacher by example; Tawnos had been clever in his youth, a toymaker of exceptional skill and a wunderkind engineer, but he was only a candle next to Urza's solar brilliance. All Tawnos knew he owed to Urza's instruction. From clever toymaker to master artificer, Urza's steady hand had molded Tawnos as skillfully and distantly as Urza had shaped the face of the world.

Tawnos squeezed his knuckles white as if trying to wring the water from the metal railing of his office's observation deck. His civils—how could he have lied to himself that those machines could be bent to any purpose other than war? Tawnos had sketched original plans for Penregon's civils, but the very theory of their design was based off machines Urza had devised—machines meant only to burn, wreck, and ruin. The civils' delicate-yet-sturdy manipulators, refined to hold construction tools and tote harvested resources, were so easily adapted to the use of weapons because they had first been designed for Urza's avengers. The civils' joints and mounting points were universal not because they needed to be able to accept replacement parts from Penregon's stockpile, but because Urza required his war machines be capable of field repair. Tawnos turned from his solitary observation, face a grotesque twist of anger and pain. The most terrible revelation hit him with unflinching clarity: of every aspect of the machines, none was more ruinous than their power supply. The powerstones of the Thran. Carefully cleaved and polished, these powerstones animated the civils as they had both Urza and Mishra's war machines. In a bitter moment, Tawnos realized that Penregon's stockpile would dry out in the coming years. Without an alternative source or method by which to power Penregon, the people's appetite would not abate—it would rage. By his eagerness to offer his aid, he had only reset the stage: a return to the condition the world was in before the beginning of the Brothers' War seemed inevitable.

Without any other way to keep the lights on, with winter coming, war would rage again. It was only a matter of time.

Tawnos sank further in his chair, staring at the mound of papers and texts on his desk. The sole library collecting the knowledge of a world long gone. He looked over the old folios, rolled blueprints, notebooks, and bound sheafs; anything he could grab before the end, anything of his master's works. Against this archive of brilliance, Tawnos was a diviner. An augur, not an engineer. Worse, a weapons-maker. Tawnos clenched his fists and a deep, sinking feeling tugged at him. In his youth, his ambition drove him to soaring heights. His ego would not let him stay content as a toymaker. Now, with a dull ache he recognized that if all he had ever done was refine the work of others, he might have been less culpable for the death of the world. If he had spent his life reading the steaming or-



*"Tawnos, Solemn Survivor", by Matt Stewart.*

gans of slaughtered bulls for gullible kings and queens, he would have done less harm.

Tawnos's eyes fell upon the corner of a little notebook familiar to him, partially buried on his desk. It was not one of Urza's—it was his own notebook. In it were his original designs—mechanical hawks and snakes, intricate complications, mechanisms for efficient use of powerstones, and of a living weapon that blended clay and artifice into a killer. Tawnos tugged that book out from under the stack of paper, opened it,



and thumbed through. It was full of wonderful diagrams, precisely drawn lines, and well-reasoned figures. Notes, jotted quickly in different colors of ink and fading graphite, spoke to the lightning moments of inspiration, revision, iteration. His handwriting, faster and more confident in his youth, showed no hint of doubt. Back then, he had been assured of his work. Fulfilled by the elegance of the weapons he designed. Justified by their purpose: the defense of the realm, the defeat of their enemies. What had changed between then and now but the uniform of their foes?

The world changed. He had changed.

Behind Tawnos the sound of creation, muffled by the large panes of glass enclosing his office, was unending. Workers strapped thick, weather-treated canvas sheaths over the civils' vulnerable joints and welded on heavy armor plates over critical components. Brilliant young artificers compiled and reviewed the orders and commands soldiers in the field would use to direct the civils in warfare. Officers of the scouts and city guard walked in small groups, learning from engineers the limitations and operational abilities of these adapted war machines. Across the city, powerstone-lit streetlights and municipal heaters went dark as technicians pried even these small chips from their mountings, so that they could be installed in the civils' chests, in the pommels of their powered chain-swords, the cores of incandescent lances. Making peace into war once more, all on Tawnos's orders.

He closed his notebook and set it atop the pile of Urza's designs.

"Send them all into the sea," Tawnos whispered. He thought of Kayla and hoped she would stay true to her promise. He thought of another woman, Ashnod, and wondered if now, after the end of the world, there was still time.

First, however, he would take his first brave action in many years. His first original idea. Tawnos would lead, finally; he would change the world for the better. He looked down at the few pages he had torn from his book: a mechanical snake, a bird, a mouse. His toys. A different method. He tucked them into his pocket.

In the dark, Tawnos smiled.

No one on the factory floor saw the fire until it was too late. It consumed Tawnos's office. Flames licked the glass, drowning everything inside in a stinking, roiling conflagration of burning paper and ink.

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The Siege of Penregon lasted a single day and by nightfall had devolved into two smaller fights: The first was the expected contest, the bloody aftermath of the Tal crusaders' failed attempt to take the city from the outside. As the sun slipped below a gray horizon, Penregon's defenders stalked out from the lone, gore-choked breach in the city walls to route the Talite



infantry. The crusaders had failed to exploit their only opening; now the survivors staggered away into the night, leaving the dead behind and the wounded moaning and crawling after them. In the distance, between the large body of the march now decamping and Penregon's victorious defenders, grim horsemen in heavy armor waited with clean weapons and dark gazes turned toward the city. Re-armed civils picked their way across the tumbled stone blocks of the breach, their weapons and cores glowing with the waste heat cast by their old powerstones. Outnumbered by the machines and their human counterparts, the Talite cavalry could only watch as Penregon's defenders took prisoners and collected the dead.



*"Myrel, Shield of Argive", by Ryan Pancoast.*

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The second battle was more widespread: Raddic's forces had at some point—likely the prior year, but no one could be certain—snuck zealots of their faith into the residential and merchant districts of Penregon. Over the long, dark, and cold months of winter these evangelists had proselytized, cultivating secret cults of the faithful. These followers of Tal's word cursed the machine and the mage both. Animated by evangelical fervor, they saw demons in the smooth metal armature of Tawnos's civils, devils in the few remaining scholars of the Path. Though there was no magic in Penregon, artifice was fuel enough for the faithful; the status of their lives, whether they lived through the war or were born in its wake, was a perfect kindling.

The conflagration sparked with the arrival of the main body of the Talite crusaders. With Raddic's declaration refused and the city gates closed, the Talites in the city surged to action. In the pre-dawn hours of the siege morning, as the Talite army was forming out in the fields before Penregon, explosions and fires rocked the city. Tawnos's factory, many of the residential districts, and several merchant ships in the harbor burned. Black-clad zealots ran into the crowds, attacking the city guard and old civils who came to put out the fire. The city's defenders were slow to respond, but mobilized en masse, bolstered by reinforcements from the wall. The Talites were driven by fervor, but Penregon's people fought for their



homes. Alley by alley, street by street, Penregon's civils and militia drove the Talites back to their safehouses. By midday, hundreds were dead and fires raged through the city, battled by brigades of volunteer firefighters. By evening, the worst of the fighting was done, and only a handful of the most die-hard cultists remained in the city, barricaded and surrounded.

Kayla had spent the brutal day in a well-defended post with the commanders of the city guard and militia. Jarsyl was with her. To leave her grandson anywhere other than at her side in such danger was unthinkable; she had lost one son to war and would be damned to risk another of her blood to the blades, even if it meant Jarsyl seeing her not as his grandmother but as his queen.

As leader of the city, Kayla was not just a witness to the military's cold calculus. When her commanders hemmed over pulling rearmed civils from the wall to fight the cultists inside, they turned to Kayla to break their deadlock. When the scouts begged for reinforcements, they turned to Kayla to order Penregon's militia levies to the breach. When dawn broke and saw the walls successfully defended, her staff needed to know—do they execute the captured Talites, jail them, or exile them? The precise tactics of the day fell to her commanders; Kayla was there to be the city's conscience, the speaker for Penregon, the one who determined who lived and who died.

The following morning Kayla stood with a cloth tied around her mouth and nose, surveying the fire-blackened ruins of Tawnos's factory. The charred skeleton of the large building jutted up into the gray sky, damp and smoking, stinking of oil and the foul chemicals that fed and were consumed by the blaze. Slag piles and ember-marbled lumps of partially melted civils packed the building's footprint.

"The fire broke out during the late shift," Myrel said, their voice muffled through their own cloth mask. "The supervisor I spoke with said it started in Tawnos's office." Myrel pointed toward an otherwise unidentifiable tangle of metal and slag. "I'm sorry ma'am, but we haven't found him—here, at his quarters, or among the dead."

Kayla nodded. Tawnos was gone. "And the workers?"

"Everyone else was able to escape," Myrel said. "Some who tried to extinguish the fire suffered from inhaling the smoke, but they will be fine with rest and good air. We lost the civils on the floor, however——at least a dozen."

"This was not an attack," Kayla said.

"The blaze was sudden," Myrel said, frowning. "And all of Urza's old plans, Tawnos's work from the war—"



"Look around, Myrel," Kayla interrupted her captain. "Nothing else burned. No one else died. The workers said the fire began in Tawnos's office while he was there. It wasn't an explosion, and no one noticed until the smoke had flooded the upper levels."

Myrel grunted, agreeing.

"Tawnos did this," Kayla said. She walked into the ruin without waiting for a response from her scout captain. The cloth mask she wore cut the stink somewhat, but the fire had been mighty, and the tang of burnt metal still wrinkled her nose. The few workers sifting through the damp ruins stopped their labors and leaned on their tools, watching Kayla with detached interest.

Kayla stopped before the heap that had been Tawnos's office, now a steaming lump of matted ash and metal where it collapsed after burning through the night. No papers or books remained, nothing but some dirty, faintly glowing chips of powerstones he must have kept on his desk.

"You selfish old man," Kayla whispered to the ashes.

The ticking and cooling of burnt metal. The hiss of dripping water, plunking into still-hot piles of ash. The scrape of shovels on stone as laborers returned to work. These were the only responses. No bright laughter or solemn murmurs, no polite cough or strong, steady voice. Another connection to her old life, severed.

"You left me nothing," Kayla said. No half-burnt journal or wondrously preserved folio of plans remained from which they could recreate his civils or devise new automatons to help Penregon face the coming winter. A season's worth of good weather and harvest stretched before her and, but for the spare dozens of civils that remained, the city would be forced once more to return to human labor. Kayla knew from haunting Tawnos's office during the last winter that the few remaining civils had short lives ahead of them—their powerstones were old and worn, harvested from war machines that all but used them up and then died a decade ago. She considered the stresses the previous day's combat must have put on them and a sour twist curdled through her.

"You left us nothing," Kayla said, standing. She looked around the ruin of Tawnos's workshop. Penregon had needed him more than she had needed him. Yes, the connection he provided to her old life had been as painful as a healing burn, but familiar. With that wound severed from her soul, she could heal; but a city was not a person. Cities never healed, they either lived or died. Tawnos, in taking his life's work and the collected knowledge of Urza's artifice with him, may have taken Penregon with him. Not now, not for years, likely, but the winter would not stop. The ice crept ever closer; if the seasons continued to compress then in some future not distant enough there would be an age of nothing but winter. A Penregon without civils and powerstones would die.



Kayla turned from the ash slurry and walked away. She had work to do. A city to save, if she could, from the end that now seemed all but inevitable.

A pair of damaged but functional civils joined the laborers later in the day. Fitted with wide shovels designed by Tawnos to clear snow from Penregon's streets, they made short work of cleaning the ruins. The ash was dumped into Penregon harbor, joining the ruined bodies of civils destroyed in the siege and those machines whose powerstone hearts had given out. The age of artifice died in Penregon's dark bay, below gentle waves, before the winter.

— 79 AR —

Penregon's end came ten years after the siege, outlasting Kayla's most optimistic predictions, but not her certainty. The intervening years were punctuated by brief moments of chaos and fear, but nothing like the siege.

First came the first whispering summer. Penregon's gardens and orchards, typically thick with the buzz of cicadas and katydids—the true roaring lions of Penregon, Argivians would joke—never sang that summer. Though many found this a relief at first, the next quiet summer curdled any humor. The birds followed the insects, and summer's quiet begat silent springs.

Ominous signs accumulated. One winter only a handful of years after the siege, Penregon's harbor suffered its first solid freeze. The sea waters

of that protected bay froze, trapping the city's fishing and trade fleets in dense bay ice. At first, people despaired. There were riots: lack of work, lack of food. When those demonstrations calmed, people took to building huts and hovels alongside the frozen hulls, creating informal, scattered villages of fisherfolk; if they could not take their ships to sea, they would take themselves to the sea. At first the merchants and ship owners hired the city guard to clear the people away, but as it became clear that the ice would not be broken, they relented and let the people fish. For every winter that followed, the bay became a new land for landlords to lease, suppliers to outfit, and laborers to work: the people found fish, the landlords made the people's work into gold—but not too much gold—and life went on.

Inland, Penregon's scouts kept up their expeditions. Early in the wake of the Talites they scouted for distant dangers. As the winters began to linger, scouts hunted for warmer lands. Kayla championed the scouts' task and the people of Penregon looked to their adventures with hope. Against the cruelties of the winter landlords of Penregon harbor, the granary chiefs of spring, and the shipmasters of summer, the scouts were heroes.

That hope was rewarded. Near the end, scouts returned with news of green lands to the distant west: beyond the trailing edge of the Southern Khers the grass still grew thick and strong. There were towns and villages there, built by the descendants of old Yotia, Korlis, and Tomakul, and



full of people who had never seen snow lower than the mountain peaks. Those people assured the scouts that further still, across the oases and sands of the Great Desert and west of the ruins of Tomakul, there stood cities. Beyond the Great Desert was a world that had been insulated from the worst of the cataclysm. The scouts were sure of it, and so Kayla—who had grown tired of the bickering merchants, landlords, guildmasters, and soldiers—proclaimed to the people of Penregon that their salvation lay in the distant west.



*"Swamp", by Sam Burley.*

That news prompted widespread excitement. Caravans were organized, supplies negotiated and bartered, homes deconstructed and packed into carts and wagons. Westbound by the thousands the settler-refugees departed, and none who went that way ever returned to Penregon. The city grew quiet. Those who stayed either clung to what they knew with pyrrhic resolve—surely the gods would lift this cold before ruin met them—or grim resignation; either they could not or would not leave the city.

Winter bled more and more into summer. Once balmy, those middling months turned crisp; omens mounted. Though usually temperate, on occasion a storm would darken Penregon for a week at a time, burying the city in drifts taller than the dark, two-story buildings of the residential districts. Penregon's few remaining civils plowed snow drifts from the city's streets, clearing the cobblestones for the lonely pedestrians who scurried from warm building to warm building. When those civils died, they simply stopped mid-labor. Balanced, they became pillars of ice as snow fell on them, melted, and then re-froze.

Penregon's end—the Penregon of Lady Kayla, the last Queen of Argive—came in autumn. Scouts returned from an expedition into Terisiare's far north, where they had heard rumors of a Gixian threat, a remnant of that foul order forgotten on Terisiare after the war's end. There, the returned scouts said, the land was buried under walking mountains of ice, great glaciers that moved slower than time but were just as unstoppable.



Trembling, the scouts told tales of the northernmost Khers crumbling, the roar of their passing echoing for days at a time. In desperation they had fled to the northeastern coast, where they observed with horror that the ocean itself had frozen to a dirty gray landmass. The sea had vomited up mountains of ice, tumbling and re-freezing, standing as tall as the Khers themselves; the cracking and popping of the frozen ocean sounded as if it were the very bones of the gods snapping. Warmed by fried fish and steaming coffee, the scouts told Kayla that the world was ending. The ice, though distant by generations, would not be stopped.

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Through it all, Kayla was calm. Her stoic demeanor was necessary if Penregon was to remain together as those portentous, unstoppable changes to the world accumulated. Standing as a public bastion against hopeless resignation took an incredible amount of work, and there was no avenue that Kayla did not explore. She prayed to the gods of Yotia, old and new—even once reaching out to Tal—but the Argivians were as close to godless as anyone and she felt nothing besides, so she stopped. She thought to emulate her late father's martial prowess and poise, so she trained her body into a warrior's strength, but she found no peace in running, riding, or swinging a sword. Away from the martial, Kayla dove into texts and scholarship, art and other disciplines. She directed the construction of a grand manor house outside of Penregon, an estate that would prove her

dedication to Argive as a gift to its future rulers—an exercise, she realized upon its completion and her relocation, in denial. She quit the manor and moved back to the city after only a year.

To the public and to her advisors, this all spoke to the drive and determination of Lady Kayla, the Queen of Argive. In public, she was an example to all: a stoic without stoicism's chill, a martyr who did not die, but burned as a beacon. This persona was a prison. It was only in private, in the dead of night, when Kayla was free to be afraid. In these dark hours Kayla let her fear out into the world. This proved to be the only outlet by which she could go on.

For the early years after the siege of Penregon and Tawnos's death, this fear was raw and unfocused: a cold-sweat anxiety that stole her from sleep. A white-hot rage, screamed into a pillow, hoping that no one could hear. She thought she could never empty herself of the pain, the anger, the grief. Every morning she awoke with her lungs raw, jaw throbbing, and head aching. It was as if she wore a crown of weighted needles, a corset of nails, and could only adjust where their points dug in. No amount of fervent prayer brought relief. No full-contact sparring or alpine ranging cleared her mind. No painting or poem could capture it. No lonely wandering through the grand and hollow halls of her manor granted her reprieve. Kayla went through the day assuring others that their pain, their sadness, their fear would not best them, that Penregon needed them, that



the world needed them. There was no truth behind her counsel: she felt nothing, could not even muster love for her grandson, and began to think that her grief might kill her.

One cold winter night, many years after the siege, it nearly did.

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Alone, shivering from the cold, drenched in sweat, Kayla clutched a balled-up fistful of cloak to her face and screamed again. She did not fear being heard. She had retreated to her manor, trudging alone through the snow to clear her mind from the small bickerings of her noble council and Penregon's moneyed princelings. The world was ending, and still those august goons argued over leases and owed rents. Myopic ticks, greedy fools. Kayla hated them. Why did they get to live when everyone she loved had died? She missed her Yotia and her family and her future and even the damn cicadas. It was too much.

Kayla—leaving only a note for Captain Myrel so that they would not send the scouts to track her down—quit the city to find a reprieve in her mothballed manor.

Wrapped in an old cloak, a dusty crimson garment rescued from Kroog, Kayla lay in a ball on the floor of the manor's grand entrance and screamed her throat raw. It had been a day since she left the city, and she had not made it any deeper into the manor. She summoned up every hor-

rible feeling and could not stop calling upon the lovely ones as well—every memory of Urza, of Tawnos, of Harbin, Jarsyl, her mother and father, of burning Kroog and shining Kroog, of Raddic and the ice, screaming until the sound left her and she could only croak, only sob, and then she felt something snap.

Heat flowed through her. Fire coursed up from some deep knot in her gut, sizzled through every nerve in her body. She gasped, terrified, and managed to throw her cloak off before sparks erupted from her hands. Furnace heat flared bright in the space above her palms, popping like a festival firework and leaving her ears ringing and face reddened from the heat.

Magic.

The ringing faded from her ears. She knew it the moment it happened. As a girl she had heard of wonders like this. All her life she had heard whispers of some power beyond artifice. Even Urza spoke of it, muttering curses about some esoteric power manipulated in far corners of the world. She had dismissed it as fantasy—as had everyone else in the combined kingdoms—but that night all doubt quit her. Magic had cracked out into the world when Urza killed it; at the nadir of her despair, Kayla had channeled fire.



Shivering and singed, alone, Kayla looked at her palms. Thin smoke rose from the air above them. They blistered. The air stank. She smiled. For the first time in years, Kayla laughed.

A new, private regimen replaced her nights of despair. She returned to the city, resumed her duties, and dispatched her stewards to search Penregon's libraries for any books or scrolls on magic. To her surprise, they found many. Survivors from Terisia City—the old seat of that esoteric order, the Third Path—had settled in Penregon, bringing with them a modest amount of their writings. Among them was a copy of a text, an exploration of the techniques of a scholar from the college of Lat-Nam and one of the Third Path's leaders, Hurkyl, who—if war stories were to be believed—once disappeared the first regiments of Mishra's army that attacked Terisia City. Kayla had heard of this during the war but assumed it to be a fantasy, hope spun from beleaguered survivors of that long and bloody siege. After her own channeling, however, she thought otherwise.

Kayla's new nightly practice followed the precepts of Hurkyl's meditative techniques as laid out in the book. She read that her control of magic could be improved first through a focus, so she retrieved a stone of her beloved Kroog from Penregon's archives and learned to pour everything into it, channeling this energy until the stone glowed and grew too hot to hold. Then, she learned to obliterate the pain. She burned herself often as she practiced, but this did not stop her. Instead, she wrapped her hands

in clean gauze and continued her practice until the channeling of this energy no longer burned her flesh or caused her pain; then, she pressed further, learning how to direct this heat, to shape it into wild flame and cold light, into repairing her own wounds.

These exercises were exhausting even as they were invigorating. Tapping into the soul as Hurkyl outlined was opening oneself to a raw font of memory and emotion. Even when the tears dried and her practice stone cooled, some hint of Kayla's despair remained. She could not burn away this final feeling. This ghost lingered with her even as her confidence grew from a novice's faltering practice to the assurance of a master. She might only light a candle with a brush of her finger, knit together a paper cut on her finger, or heat a stone to coal-hot in the palm of her hand, but it was the simple fact that this could happen—and that she could control it—that assured her of her mastery.

Kayla realized this: if she could manage her wild and sudden magic, then she could bring herself back from darkness. Both demanded the same effort, and she was a diligent student.

Kayla cooled as her practice stone did, night by night, session by session. Instead of raging through her grief, Kayla imbued her stone with her fire, touched it to a candle, and controlled her anger as the candle burned down. She encountered that familiar pain, mulled it over, accepted it, and then set it aside. Despair had not quit her, instead Kayla had



heard it out, and then bade it farewell; the sun rose each morning despite the ice, and each morning, people more scared and less able than she came to petition her for help, guidance, aid, and comfort. Each day, she did what she could to help them. Each day, the woman she knew as Kayla bin-Kroog—not Lady Kayla—did not die. She changed. She survived. She was still afraid, but no longer without hope; she was not afraid of the night when she knew she carried an ever-burning flame inside of her.

So when the scouts returned with news of hope in the west, Kayla saw to it that any of her people who wanted to make the journey were provisioned and protected, ordering Myrel and their scouts to take whatever goods those pilgrims needed from the storehouses of the guildmasters and grain-lords. There was little they could do to resist Lady Kayla's order, though some tried; they discovered they were alone with their gold and mercenaries against the people, and the lords that lived relented. Most all the scouts left Penregon as vanguards for the migration, followed by nearly half of the city's population arranged in long wagon trains. Myrel went with them; Kayla saw them off, kissing Myrel on both cheeks as a mother would a beloved child, assuring them they would see each other again someday in the west.

Penregon quieted after the last of the wagon trains departed, darkened as the longer winters settled in. Storms battered the city. During one especially bitter blizzard, the Talite crusaders returned. Kayla ordered the

gates open and invited them into Penregon's dark streets. They demanded she tell them where she hid the machines, to which she informed the crusaders they had walked off across the ice. Kayla told them Penregon had nothing to hide and no demons but hungry people; she offered to shelter them, and the Talites finally entered Penregon. Curious, she asked after Raddic, who was nowhere among the ranks of hard-bitten crusaders.

"Dead," their new leader said. He was a gaunt and cold man, with none of Raddic's charm. Kayla had found him in the market streets, buying spirits and wines.

"After the Iron Tower we marched to Mishra's forge," he told her. "The demons there were great in number and fury, but thanks be to Tal we killed them all. Many of the faithful died, Raddic among them." He buried bottles of spirits in his saddlebags. "Who was he to you?"

"No one," Kayla said. "A reminder of the old world."

The gaunt man and his retinue left, and the long, dark-clad column of Talites—what was left of them after years on campaign—followed, trudging west through the snow into the white blankness.

The last year wound down. With each passing day from the first, people bled from the city, stripping it of life, heat, and sound. Districts faded into disrepair, and the city shrank.



Kayla was among the last to quit Penregon. It was her city, but she would not die in its cold, empty streets. That grief she had poured it into her Kroog stone; she left when she had something to leave for. Her scouts returned with dried blades of grass and pressed flowers and promised oceans of green, a living world beyond the desert, beyond the snow-capped Khers and ruin of the east. There were towns and cities, her scouts assured her, and there was something else: a story, tender and cruel, of a man and a flying machine in the western sky.

Harbin.

Kayla had poured out all her grief. With it fled the grief that can be tinged with hope. So upon hearing this story, Kayla did not let her heart burst. She did not rush from Penregon alone to cross mountains and rivers to find her son. She prepared a final caravan of her people and went west with them, leaving only the grim and bloodied landlords of Penregon harbor behind, who refused to move from their miserable manors, where they stayed counting their gold until the ice took them.

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Kayla left Penregon and her manor behind and marched out along the now well-defined route with the rest of the exodus. Up into the howling Khers her caravan struggled, choosing the lowest of the passes and still losing a quarter of their number to the cold, the dark, and the desperate

creatures there. Down from those bitter passes they staggered, trundling by the stone-frozen bodies of hundreds who perished on this route years before. The lower elevations brought some relief as the migration finally came upon the shores of that green west. Here, in the shadow of the bitter Khers, Kayla was once more in the land of her youth. Yotia, her dominion by right, the land she once would have ruled as queen. She always hated the bloody, martial Warlord and Warlady titles. How vile they were, and how corrupting. How could one rule a land in peace when their gods-given title named them a master of war?

Kayla knew she would have been a good queen.

The Mardun flowed swollen and wider than she remembered it, rich with spring meltwater. Their migration followed the old river by its new banks, winding along its bends and crossing at the small fords and ferry towns they encountered. No one had built bridges yet, but by Kayla's figuring they were not far off. The snow and ice did not threaten the lands to the west of the Khers as much as it had menaced Penregon and the east; the long winter was coming, only delayed by that continental wall, and for now there was still money to be made in the mountains' shadow. Some of her caravan, fatigued and aching, stopped their migration in these budding towns. There was rich soil to be tilled here, gold to pan, old metals to scavenge, game to trap, and fish to harvest. One could make



a life here; a life in the wake of civilizations, but it was a life one could live, rather than just survive.

The foothills and thick forests soon fell away to dry prairie. Under open sky the last hundred refugees of Penregon's exodus continued west, passing by the moss-covered ruins of old war machines and abandoned redoubts. Their route took them through the crumbled stone ruins of dead towns and across old battlefields—trenches and craters now shallow ponds where frogs sang in the evening, the bones of the dead long decayed to mulch for lilies and boughs of reeds where small birds flitted. The route west was a graveyard as much as it was a road; occasionally they would pass the rotting wooden skeletons of carriages and carts, the bodies of their owners and draft beasts that once hauled them long since eaten by scavengers or buried where they had fallen.

Eventually they came to New Yotia, the first city of the west. A wooden sprawl built atop a mesa overlooking the vast westward sweep of land, New Yotia perched above the tumbling waters of the old Mardun. Large paddlewheels churned in the river, turning mills and powering all manner of riverside industry. The city had no walls beyond the natural rise of the mesa and earthworks facing the mountains; it was surrounded by cultivated fields and small farmers' collectives. Tall signal towers marched toward the city at regular intervals, rattling to life as their operators saw the approaching train of wagons.

New Yotia welcomed them as Penregon once welcomed those who came to its gates. Most of Kayla's people settled there, finding the city a warm and familiar comfort. Kayla nearly did as well; she was tired and New Yotia reminded her of her youth. The scents, the food, the music, the language—even the buildings, though they were simple wooden affairs—were Yotian through and through. New Yotia was not Kroog—Kroog's corpse lay many dozens of miles ahead—but it was close.

Kayla lingered in New Yotia for the rest of the winter, living in relative comfort above a small tea shop in a busy quarter of the city. By the summer, she decided it was time to continue west. New Yotia was a busy river port for the trappers, miners, and farmers that ranged up and down the western side of the Khers. Some came from even further, and it was through this churn of people that Kayla learned there were indeed other cities further west: Lat-Nam, Sumifa, and other cities old and new, untouched by the cataclysm that doomed the east. As well, Kayla heard more stories. One of a sleek machine, silver as a mirror and fast as the light's flash, and the last flying man who soared the western blue. He was a hero, the people said. He'd flown into the sun to steal its gold, they said. He'd died in the cataclysm, they said, and was reborn as the wind's herald. Harbin, her son, legend of the western sky.

Dead or alive, ghost or spirit, Kayla resolved to cross the continent to learn the truth. Strange things were happening in Terisiare—with Tawnos she had seen the dead return. Within herself and Jarsyl she had seen magic. The old world was dying, remembering, trembling; a new world was being born.



— 80 AR —

The evening before Kayla was bound to depart for the west, her grandson, Jarsyl, came to her modest apartment. They ate a private dinner of refined Yotian cuisine on her deck overlooking a busy marketplace, attended to by a single servant whom Kayla sent away after the final plate had been set. It was a light meal and the two of them ate in silence, letting the sound of the evening crowd below fill the space until Kayla could not stand her grandson's moping any longer.

"Jarsyl," Kayla said, placing her utensils down on the table. "You're eating like a songbird."

"I'm sorry, gran-mama," Jarsyl said. He sat hunched as much as his training in posture allowed. His food, save for perfunctory cuts, was untouched.

"You've not met my eyes once," Kayla said. "You're haunted. Is it a lover, your practice, or something else?"

"Something else," her grandson said. Jarsyl looked off over the market. "Why did you choose this place?" He asked. "You are queen—you could have taken quarters in the new palace."

"True," Kayla said. "But I have been removed from my people for so long. I wished to live among them." She returned to her meal.

"But you don't have guards."

"I am an old woman," Kayla said, "and I am happy that my age of perfume is behind me. I want to stink of spice, oil, and incense; I do not need guards, and I do not want them."

"And the Talites?" Jarsyl said. He searched the market below and pointed at a pair of Talite soldiers, haggling with a tea vendor. "They say they're hunting mages now."

"They do say that." Kayla nodded, taking a bite of her food.

"You're not worried?"

Kayla laughed. "Certainly not. Every old woman has been called a witch by someone, especially those old women unlucky enough to lead nations. Besides—they can't get us all." She winked, and a soft thrum of energy filled the apartment. As one, the oil lamps Kayla had left burning snuffed out, then re-ignited.

Jarsyl's eyes widened. He looked toward the Talites in the market below. They had not noticed. No one noticed.



"The Talites don't concern me." Kayla said, smiling. She nodded toward Jarsyl's nearly full plate. "Your lack of appetite concerns me—that and your deflection. What haunts you?"

Jarsyl prodded his cooling food.

"Out with it," Kayla said, kind but firm.

"I can't go with you."

Kayla arched an eyebrow. Jarsyl may have been a man, but in this moment, he was as timid as a schoolboy. For a heartbeat her blood ran cold, but she managed to compose herself before her face could break.

Jarsyl looked so much like his father. Harbin had stood before her, once, the day he told her he meant to join the 'thopter corps. The hitch of fear—not of what could be, but of how she would respond—caught Jarsyl's voice in his throat the same way it had Harbin, all those long years ago.

She took a breath. There was no war. Jarsyl, the bright boy, was not Harbin.

"I've heard stories," Jarsyl began, "of a school to the north, on the banks of Ronom Lake."

"There's nothing in Ronom," Kayla said. "The Gixians were driven out a decade ago by the first Talite crusade."

"Right, yes," Jarsyl said. "But I've heard there is something else there now—a school for people who can... do what we do."

"A school for magic?"

Jarsyl nodded. "Magic and artifice, both. They're teaching people like us how to be better. Stronger."

Kayla considered this. Jarsyl was, by the customs of the old world and the demands of the new, an adult—though she often thought of him as a young boy still. His life had been lived at her side, abandoned by his father and grown at the end of the world. The end of her world. His world, though perilous, was young as he and growing still—were the rumors he chased any less credible than the stories she followed?

"'Magic and artifice,'" Kayla repeated. She wondered—could it be? "Did they say who runs this school?"

"An artificer woman, Nod, and a mage they called 'Duck,'" Jarsyl said. He rubbed the back of his neck, as if ashamed to speak the names aloud. "I think he might be from the west, it's a funny name."

Nod and Duck. Old friends and new. Kayla always wondered if Tawnos truly died that day. She smiled at Jarsyl. "Go north. If there are teachers greater than me, seek them out."



Jarsyl brightened, as if a weight lifted from his shoulders. Still, tears sprang to his eyes.

Kayla stood and rounded the table to Jarsyl, gathering him up into an embrace. "My boy," she whispered, squeezing him tight. "You and I have different stories. Mine might be ending, but yours is about to begin."

"I'm afraid to go," Jarsyl said, his voice muffled by her embrace.

"Me too," Kayla said. She kissed her grandson's cheek. "But I am excited, as well. Let's choose to let excitement lead us, yes?"

Jarsyl nodded. He stepped back and wiped his nose dry. "Will you tell him about me?" he asked. He didn't need to say his name for Kayla to know who he meant.

"I will," Kayla said. "If you tell Headmaster Duck about me. Now, when do you leave?"

"There is a party departing tomorrow morning," Jarsyl said, curiosity over his grandmother's wish vanishing as he rattled off his plans. "I'll have to hurry to the outfitters, but I have already told the pathfinder of my interest—they're expecting me." His tears had dried, and already he began to speak around his breath. When he was excited, he positively burned with energy.

Schooling, if indeed there was a school of magic, would do him good, Kayla thought. “You should not linger,” Kayla said. She motioned for him to go. “Hurry and gather your things, let the pathfinder know that you will certainly be joining them in the morning.”

“It’s hard to say goodbye, gran-mama,” Jarsyl said. “I don’t want to.”

Kayla nodded. “Then let’s not say goodbye,” she said. She embraced him once more, and then kissed him on the forehead. “’Til later, my boy.”

“’Til later,” Jarsyl whispered.

Kayla sent her grandson away. The following morning, she left before the dawn.

…

The quickest and safest way west was via the Mardun. That grand river would pass the ruins of Kroog and deposit them at the edge of the desert, where they would follow the high roads through the ruins of Tomakul and beyond.

Kayla was curious to see her old home. The New Yotians told her that the Mardun long ago flooded the city, having been shaken from its banks by the tremendous, cataclysmic detonation that rocked Terisiare. Save for the southern districts of the Kroog where the royal palace and noble quarters of the city once stood, much of the city remained underwater.



The grand old capital was now a lake along the new course of the river, fed by the distant snowmelt from the southern Khers.

Kayla was not surprised to hear that a warlord ruled Kroog again. This one was a brute who styled himself after the mighty leaders of old. His raider gangs menaced the roads and fields around the city; it was better to take a swift riverboat guarded by New Yotian archers and Talite mercenaries. The Church of Tal was thick in New Yotia, numerous as the wildflowers in the prairie. Those dour penitents and demon hunters were a nuisance to the bright joys of New Yotia, but their order was large and provided for the common defense of the city. Kayla understood that their presence was necessary to counter the threat of raiders from Kroog. As well, she understood that alone she could not root them out and expel them from this city that could be her home—not even with her magic. So she did not protest when a detachment of dark-clad soldiers filed onto her riverboat. The Talites wore clean uniforms of a deep and inky blue, their armor black, their swords oiled and free of rust. A far cry from the desperate rabble that once assailed Penregon; it seemed their first defeat did not deter their faith.

The Talites took the bottom deck and the hold, while the passengers and New Yotian archers took the top deck. Should fighting occur, the worst of it would fall upon the Talites; they did not mind this arrangement, nor did Kayla. Below her the Talites prayed, ate, maintained their weapons,

slept, and kept watch. None of them looked at her. None of them knew who she was, and none of them seemed to care. This was much to Kayla's liking, as well.

Once underway, Kayla ruled the second deck of the riverboat, ignoring the captain's orders to return to her cabin during the evening hours. She kept no company but her own and resisted conversation. The New Yotian contingent recognized Kayla's old-world accent and bearing and did not mark her distance from them as an insult: an old eccentric, they assumed, one of the few elders who lived through the end of the world. The New Yotians stopped their inquiries and advances after the first few nights on the river. Left alone, Kayla was free to rest and watch the world pass by.

The ruins of Kroog were a day ahead. On her lap, the last pages of a poem she had been working on. An epic, a history of the men who killed the world, lest they ever be forgotten—or forgiven.

Bright laughter from the New Yotians practicing their archery drew her attention, the twang and thrum of their bows as they fired at targets along the bank—trees, fence posts from long-abandoned farms, rusted remains from the war—making a contest out of their training. On the deck below, one of the Talites started to sing and soon the rest joined in, their voices rising together in chorus.



Another week of this did not sound so bad. Kayla was quite curious to see Tomakul—even if that grand city was only ruins—and was eager to explore those lands further west, of which she had only ever heard described in story.

Kayla tapped her foot on the deck in time with the singing. She closed her folio, deciding to take a break from writing for the day. The gentle rocking motion of the riverboat soothed her. The sun was warm on her face. She closed her eyes and smiled.

Kayla was free.

**— 85 AR —**

Kroog itself looked nothing like the grand city it once was. Its proud stone towers had all but crumbled, save for a handful of hollow monoliths that were now home only to nesting birds. These lone sentinels of the lake remained the tallest structures in Kroog but were not seen as part of the new city that sprawled there; Kroog after the cataclysm was a midden heap of buildings and walkways that huddled atop one another, built above the water on a forest of stilts. Everything in the city was devoted to one of two things: harvesting the bounty of the lake or raiding up and down the river to add coins, captives, and salvage to the wealth of Warlord Fask, the Tyrant of Kroog.

Fask was a clever brute. A warlord in title and bearing, he had killed his way to the top in the decade following the cataclysm. Now Fask ruled a petty kingdom that stretched from the ruins of Zegon on the southwestern coast of Terisiare up to the greening desert's boundary in the north. To the east his land was ill-defined, contested by New Yotia and the Talites who still managed to hold his reavers at bay. Inside his borders all paid tribute to him, a simple system of "Four-Of-Ten"—four of any goods were given to his treasury and personal chest, and the remainder spread out among his loyal subjects. He was, to the chagrin of the people who suffered his reign, the fairest of the warlords who had contested this ground. Thus, Fask commanded the loyalty of his favored warriors and the submission of the rest of his subjects until his death.

Fask's end saw his realm carved up between rising domains and hungry warlords. New Yotia and the Talites conquered and annexed the eastern half of his domain while Fask's rivals tore apart the western half. No one knows if the fighting there ever stopped; those records, if they ever were kept, have been lost to time and the ice, or were buried in the archives of the Church of Tal. Lost as well was the story Fask's end, the nighttime tale of the tyrant and the ghost.

...

Warlord Fask, the Tyrant of Kroog, awoke in the deepest pit of the night. A sound in his chambers: cans, coins, and medallions rattling together.



Fask threw off his thin sheet blanket and grabbed his sword, naked as he was in the bed beside him, and leveled it toward the sound. His chambers were unrecognizable from their usual spartan appointments, but he had ordered them to be packed thick as any storehouse or treasury. His guards whispered of the Warlord's paranoia and madness, but Fask was desperate. He needed to prove what he had seen.

A web of strings crisscrossed the large room, and from them all manner of small bright things were suspended: cans, coins, silver and tin utensils, medallions, knives, chain shirts, arrowheads—anything that would create a loud, unmistakable commotion when disturbed by a person's touch. This was Fask's trap, his system to prove he was not mad, but perceptive.

For months Fask had been plagued by voices in the night. Footsteps and the sounds of conversation, building and falling. Outwardly he feared an assassin—this was the reason for his alarm system, he told his guards—but inwardly he feared something else, something more deadly: fate.

Fask wiped sweat from his eyes and recalled unbidden the oracle's words once more:

*The dead do not forget their killer, she cackled through bloody teeth. We will meet again someday—every cut of your sword will be returned a thousandfold!*

Fask had encountered the oracle one dark and rainy night during his conquest of the Sword Marches, as he and his reavers tore down a nameless village that had stood against them. The doom she cursed him with had haunted him for a decade; though he sat on a throne he built through war, nothing since the cataclysm had weighed so heavily on his mind.

In the quiet minutes that followed his awakening, Fask felt a curtain of shame descend over his sweat-cooled back. He was a fool to fear that ancient crone. The sword was a fine and proud weapon, sharp as a razor, and his room empty. He was Fask, the Tyrant of Kroog, the Warlord of Old Yotia! The wind, surely it had been the wind over the lake—

The rattle came from the foot of his bed.

"Who is there?" Fask cried out, sword held in a two-handed grasp before him. Fear commanded him, and he could not stop from trembling.

"You will tell me who you are," Fask demanded. "Who sent you, spirit?"

Silence. A pause long enough for Fask to think himself into circles. Maybe it was the wind—a strong wind yes, but maybe it was just that. No, impossible! It would have to be a gale outside to move these lines—surely what had disturbed them was alive; they were strung at chest height, with cans and broken glass scattered on the floor. It was impossible for someone to not make a sound moving in Fask's chambers.



Another rattling at the foot of his bed. The brief hiss of something, something angry, as if a beast stalked toward him, fangs bared and maw slavering.

Fask scrambled up to his feet and pressed his back to the wall, moving as far from the sound as he could. He saw nothing, despite the bright moonlight filtering in through the narrow, barred window to his room. Shifting his grip to hold the sword in one hand, he reached across his bed to a hooded oil lamp he kept there. He twisted a knob on the lamp, and its shade flipped open. A beam of warm light stabbed out across the dark, illuminating the foot of his bed.

A man stood there. Not a man—a dim shadow, a bruise on the room's darkness unbroken by the oil lamp's beam. It was a spirit, half-realized, a mist that shifted between formless smoke and the solid figure of a man. Fask could make out the close-cropped hair on the spirit's head, the neatly trimmed beard. The spirit stared at him, unmoving.

Fask screamed. The Tyrant of Kroog dropped his sword and clapped his hands over his eyes. He fell to his knees. This was the doom he feared, the ghost of the dead, come to drag him down below the cold waters of Kroog, the graveyard upon which he built his kingdom.

The spirit drifted backward, movement resolving into steps as his bottom half coalesced from mist to form. He bumped into another string of cans and medallions, which jingled softly.

Guards burst into the room, swords drawn, but saw only their lord screaming and clawing at his own face. They looked to each other in confusion. Some decided to help Fask and hurried to his side. Others, dark looks clouding their rough faces, left. They had seen enough.

...

"Kaya," Teferi said, whispering unseen and unheard from the shadows. "Pull me out."

"You've only been in there for a few minutes, Teferi," Kaya responded, her voice was soft as the breeze through the distance. "What did you do?!"

"Nothing!" Teferi said. "I think he saw me." He watched the naked screaming man roll around on his bed, lashing out at the other men—his guards, it seemed—who were trying to calm him down.

"And I may be, ah, coherent," Teferi said. He tested this theory by reaching out and plucking one of the trap strings. It bounced, gently, as if a breeze had shifted the line—far too much movement for his comfort—he was meant to be insubstantial, nothing more than a spirit, not actually, physically present. Teferi shook his head. "The Anchor isn't calibrated correctly, Kaya, and I think we undershot our target—we didn't go far back enough. Pull me out."

Kaya muttered something Teferi couldn't make out.



"What was that?"

"Nothing," Kaya said. "Saheeli has some thoughts."

Teferi could hear Kaya rolling her eyes.

"Alright," Kaya said. "Pulling you back."

Teferi's spirit dissolved into mist, leaving the night undisturbed but for the screams of the Tyrant of Kroog.

...

Many centuries later, an ancient man regaled his grandchildren with the story of that night. He spoke for them of the strife that followed, the kingdoms that rose and fell because of a ghost, and the importance of omens and magic.

None of his grandchildren thought his tale anything more than just a story, but they loved the faces and sounds their grandfather would make when telling it, and so they asked for it often. Stories kept spirits high during the bitterly cold nights on the glaciers of Terisiare.

The Ice Age was upon Dominaria, and though these grandchildren all went on to live long lives and recount various versions of this story to their own dynasties, none of them outlived the ice, and neither did the story of the tyrant and the ghost.

# EPISODE III
# Sword One

THE ORNIARY. CADET SANWELL. SWORD ONE.
CELEBRATION DAYS. THE DRAGON. THE GODS OF YOTIA.
THE WAR BEGINS. NOT YET.

— 28 AR —

Kroog died on a crimson morning.

To Sanwell it sounded like a festival day, only the crowds cheered in a minor key, and the booms and reports were not fireworks exploding, and the smoke rising over the city stank of burning industry and steaming bricks.

The orniary's main yard was abuzz with activity. Technicians and artificers sprinted back and forth hauling anti-armor bolts, powerstones, and avenger swords. Stompers and other autonomous units waited in ready ranks, crowding the plaza. Piles of ammunition, spare parts, and other material stood in hasty stacks. The five student pilots and their instructor stood in front of the canvas-covered supplies, facing a rank of refurbished, old avengers.

The morning sun hung low and hot in the sky, burning away the rest of the night's blood-warm rain. Sanwell, at attention, swayed, lightheaded. His stomach lurched, and he retched on the hot brick between his boots.



*"Mishra's Juggernaut", by Steve Prescott.*

"Pilot Sanwell, you will tighten up your constitution," Llora shouted. The cadets' instructor was red-faced and stern, dressed in a crisp and clean uniform despite the early hour and hurried muster.



"Sorry, ma'am," Sanwell said. He spat the last of his sick out onto the hot stone plaza and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He had nothing to cough up but water and nerves; the attack had come before breakfast.

"You good, San?" Rica muttered.

Sanwell's face burned with embarrassment. Rica stood unwavering at his side, as stoic as if he was carved from the red brick of Kroog itself.

"Fine," Sanwell said. He wanted to die. "I think I had something sour last night."

Rica did not answer. The warning bells of Kroog rang out across the city. The sound churned Sanwell's stomach almost as much as Rica's stiff non-acknowledgement.

"I'm worried about my brother," Sanwell said. "Rendall is in the capital proper—he's a flyer, he's not cut out for fighting."

"Eyes forward!" Llora barked, interrupting Sanwell's one-sided conversation with Rica. The old Suwwardi paced before the short line of avenger trainees, staring at each one in turn. The woman was tough as new leather and harsh as the lime that cured it, thin as a reed and sharp as needle.

Sanwell felt faint. He was dipping into metaphor, he realized, to get away from the moment.

"You five cadets," Llora began, "have the honor of being the only ground-pounders in the city capable of crewing an avenger while keeping your head on your shoulders." Llora pointed to the ground beneath her boots. "You are being called up, boys. Training is over. Today's the day you save Kroog."

Sanwell looked between his own boots at the crimson bricks, neatly laid in spiraling star patterns. That had taken some getting used to for Sanwell—the Yotians decorated everything. It meant everything from cooking to construction took a little bit longer, but to young Sanwell that was worth it. In Kroog, as in much of Yotia, even the streets were art. Unlike the grim and stoic blocks of his native Penregon, Sanwell could walk with his head low or eyes up and either way he would find a little majesty. It was as a city should be, Sanwell came to think: full of little wonders, plainly hidden delights, all watched over by mighty triumphs.

Was he ready to fight to defend it?

Not a theoretical question. Llora had just leaned in, face to face, to ask him.

Sanwell blinked and wavered.

"I said," Llora growled, "are you ready to fight for Kroog?"

"Uh, yes, I am," Sanwell said.



"Yes, *ma'am*," Llora corrected Sanwell. "You're on the line now, Sanwell. No more training, no more practice. You ready to fight?"

"Yes ma'am," Sanwell said, louder.

Llora nodded. "Show me," she said. She pressed a slim device into Sanwell's hand and stepped back. The four other students—pilots, Sanwell corrected. *Mentality. Change your mind, change reality. You're a pilot now*—the four other pilots walked to Llora, taking up relaxed but attentive positions behind the instructor.

Sanwell took the handheld device—a command rod, but a new model—and checked it. It was the length of his forearm, etched on one end for grip, tapered ever so slightly at the smooth opposite end. A small, tactile switch rested under his thumb when he held the rod. Sanwell thumbed the rod on, and a soft hum warmed the tool. A toggle and a trigger rested under his pointer and ring fingers; more controls. Sanwell flipped the toggle and listened to the slight change in the rod's pitch. He pointed the rod at the ground, pulled the trigger, and saw the brief flash of light on his palm.

"Check," Sanwell said. He raised the command rod. Stopped. "Uh, ma'am," he said to Llora. "Which unit am I paired to?"

Llora pointed with her chin. "That one," she said.

Sanwell turned. His jaw dropped.

A new, shining avenger, one of the sword pattern prototypes, still curled on its transport sledge. Sanwell had only seen the plans for them, passed around the mess during meals. They were larger, lighter, faster, more powerful—unkillable, the artificers bragged. The best they've made to date.

Behind this avenger waited four more. Technicians and artificers hurried to clear the packing debris—straw, canvas sheathes, leather pads, and protective oils—from the waiting avengers, preparing them for activation.

Sanwell grinned, nerves momentarily suppressed by excitement.

"You'll find these sword patterns much more intuitive than the units you've been training with—even for prototypes." Llora said. Sanwell thought he could hear the pride in his instructor's voice.

"What's its name?" Sanwell asked Llora.

"Sword One," Llora said.

Sanwell raised his command rod and clicked the transmit button. The rod pitched up.

"Sword One, at attention!"

Sword One unfolded, standing from its sledge. The machine was humanoid, around fifteen feet tall at the shoulder. The prototype avenger looked



to Sanwell like a lithe knight animated by magic fire: a mirror-polished cuirass covered its central power core, exhaust apertures fluttering, venting excess heat from its thoracic powerplant. The roar of its power core sent a rush through Sanwell. This was power, and it awaited his command.

"Sword One," Sanwell spoke firm and clear, as he had been trained. The command rods themselves were little wonders, able to pick out its operator's voice through the chaos of battle or a crowd. "At the ready!"

The avenger moved in a fluid, silent twist to a low ready stance, positioning one manipulator on the hilt of its primary blade, the other out for balance. Sanwell rocked backward, hair tousled by the rush of air displaced by the speed of Sword One's maneuver.

"Sword One, draw and guard!"

Sword One drew its primary blade, whipping it into a medium guard, one manipulator on the bladeshaft to guide it and stabilize against incoming attacks. The blade was larger than a person, eight feet long and a foot wide at the base. Like its cuirass, it was polished to a mirror shine and caught the sun, flashing as it moved.

Sanwell could not suppress his excitement. With one of these, they could turn the tide. With five? He raised the rod one last time.

"Sword One," Sanwell commanded. "To me!"

The avenger darted toward Sanwell, stopping in a defensive crouch above him, sword at the ready.

"Good work, Sanwell." A different speaker.

Sanwell turned and saw Tawnos, Urza's chief apprentice, standing with Llora and the other pilots.

"Sir," Sanwell saluted. He double keyed the command rod and, as with the older stompers, Sword One dropped its defensive stance, resting at ease.

"I see you're acquainted with our new model already," Tawnos said. He spoke with a smile, though Sanwell read through the chief apprentice's brave face.

"It's a dream, Chief," Sanwell said. "Movement fidelity feels one to one—how did Urza do it?"

"Later, son," Tawnos said. He was breathless, as if he had just stopped from a run.

Sanwell realized that was probably the case: the cause for this promotion was not a happy one. Kroog was under attack. He walked over to the group of students and fell in line with them.

"You five are the best of our student corps," Tawnos said, addressing Sanwell, Rica, and the others. "Llora here has told me that each of you



possess the skills, temperament, and cleverness necessary to command our sword-pattern avengers, and so it is with great pride that I hereby, officially, promote you to full pilots."

The cadets looked to each other with excitement over having their promotions confirmed—and by Urza's own assistant, no less!

"We can't go through the usual ceremony right now, nor can we bother with unit placement," Tawnos said. He spoke with a slight hunch, apologetic, a stiff formality about his presentation. He really meant it, Sanwell thought, he really was sorry there could not be any ceremony about the day. Sanwell's heart swelled—Urza may have been the brilliant one, but Tawnos was nearly as smart, and he cared. That made all the difference.

"Kroog is under attack," Tawnos said. "The first waves of Mishra's force have crossed the Mardun; they control the River Wards. The spearhead of their attack is a detachment of dragon engines—large automatons capable of breathing fire. We believe them to be unpiloted."

The students—pilots, Sanwell reminded himself, for *real* this time—exchanged worried looks. Rica, Sanwell knew, was Yotian, and so was Carlo, who was from Kroog's River Wards. Sanwell looked to Carlo and saw he had paled, a bloodless look of fear and worry falling over him. Sanwell put a hand on his back, hoping to steady him.

"Thanks," Carlo said, quietly.

"The city guard and Kroog's garrison have drawn a defensive line around the capital district," Tawnos continued. "Evacuations of the other districts are underway."

"Does that mean we've given up the city?" Carlo said, voice wavering. "What about the River Wards?"

"It means we're defending what we can hold," Tawnos said, ignoring Carlo's second question. "But standing in one place isn't going to win us the day, which is where you and your new avengers come in: we're going to mount a counterattack to buy the evacuations more time." Tawnos motioned to Llora, who hefted a long crate into the middle of the group. She levered the crate open, revealing four command rods packed in straw.

"Each of you take one and pair up," Llora said. "Sanwell, you stick with Sword One." She passed Sanwell an empty holster.

"We need you and your avengers to take down the dragon engines," Tawnos said. "Once the engines are down, we stand a chance to drive Mishra's forces back."

Sanwell listened to Tawnos's briefing as he belted the holster on. The command rod fit snug in the leather scabbard. That moment made this moment real, Sanwell realized. He looked to the other cadets—pilots—and watched them pair up with their avengers. Rica took Two, Carlo paired



with Three. The others were cadets from a different year, the one just after Sanwell's, and unfamiliar to him. They paired with Four and Five.

"Good," Tawnos said when all the pilots were paired. "I have to go, but I've given instructions here to Llora for your deployment." He looked to the five pilots, hesitating. "We'll have soldiers escort you, so don't worry about being exposed to the fighting," Tawnos said. His voice was hoarse, as if he had been shouting, even though all he did was talk. "With these avengers, visual range will do—anything you say into the command rod, they'll be able to pick up. Don't get too close, aim with the rod, and remember to stay behind your escorts. Good luck, cadets—" Tawnos said. "Pilots," he corrected. "Good luck, pilots. Stay safe, and if you're in danger—don't think, just run. Hench, in the east, is where I have been told the army will gather."

Tawnos's face was a pale mask, graying as if wounded. Sanwell searched for the optimism that usually animated Tawnos but did not find it. A bolt of worry bittered his gut: Tawnos was afraid. Calm and steady Tawnos, the one who came to mess and laughed with the cadets, was afraid. He couldn't even look at them. Worry curdled to fear, a little fear that gnawed at him. How bad was it out there, really? A sudden snap of adrenaline, and Sanwell flinched, moving to raise his hand as if he were still in class.

"Master Tawnos, sir?" Sanwell asked. "My younger brother, Rendall—he's a cadet in the ornithopter corps, stationed at the palace."

"Rendall," Tawnos said, frowning. "I might know him, but don't worry—all of our 'thopters are deployed with Urza's forces elsewhere or about to depart," Tawnos said. "If he's in the 'thoper corps, he'll be out of here soon enough."

Sanwell exhaled a long breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He did not have time to thank Tawnos, though, as a sudden and tremendous explosion roared up on the far side of the city along the Mardun, where the fighting was heaviest.

The commotion in the orniary yard stopped as everyone turned to look, even Tawnos and Llora, at the distant calamity.

Roiling crimson smoke leapt into the sky. A whole block of the city rippled with fire. Sanwell could see a darker shape moving in the center of that rising blaze, a conflagration so great that flames swallowed the tops of the belltowers that remained standing. They crumbled as the dark shape moved and another roar split the sky, a gout of smoke and fire lancing through the blocks along the Mardun.

A dragon engine.

Tawnos cursed. He pressed a small order scroll into Llora's hands, with instructions to give them to the captain at their post. He left the yard with a quick salute to the pilots, hurrying just short of running.



"Right," Llora said, watching him go. "Let's get moving—double quick, avengers online and vigilant." Sanwell noticed that Llora had belted on a sword at some point during Tawnos's briefing.



*"Sanwell, Avenger Ace", by Josu Hernaiz.*

As a unit, the five pilots and their avengers filed out of the yard. Sanwell looked back over his shoulder as they departed; behind, crews hurried to repurpose the transport sledges to haul any goods, materials, chassis, and supplies they could fit. They were preparing to evacuate the orniary.

A shout from Llora. Sanwell was falling behind.

"With me, One," Sanwell said to his avenger. Together, the two of them hurried to catch up with the rest of the pilots as they moved down into the city.

...

Kroog was burning and people choked her streets, fleeing the fire. Sanwell couldn't stop thinking about festival days, where competing parades to the many gods of Yotia snarled the wide brick boulevards and cheering crowds thronged in the side streets. The ringing of festival bells crashed and clamored through the city, a high and bright sound of chaotic joy that propelled and intertwined with the music that filled the air. Sanwell had been overwhelmed during his first festival season in Kroog; by his second year in the city, he fell in love with it. Far from the ponderous ceremonies in Argive, the festivals in Kroog and across Yotia were ebullient, alive. Never in his young life had Sanwell lived in a place where the gods were so close—and never did he imagine himself becoming someone who loved that proximity.

But today, in the blood-slick red brick streets, the gods felt quite distant. This day was a dark mirror to those celebration days, and each block the pilots advanced plunged them deeper into that horrible mirror; the ringing bells today were the same bells that tolled on celebration days, only now they screamed.



"Listen," Llora commanded Sanwell and the rest of the pilots. "Stay close to me and order your avengers to do the same—they will avoid civilians better if you let them navigate the crowd on their own. You focus on staying close to me."

Llora and the pilots hurried through the city streets, shoving their way through the fleeing crowds as they made for the northern district. Sanwell labored under the weight of his pilot kit, donned in haste that morning. Not two blocks into the city proper and his jumpsuit was soaked through with sweat under the light cuirass. The satchels he carried—spare powerstones for Sword One, a brace of tools, small and delicate replacement parts—together felt like an anvil's weight across his shoulders. The few encouraging shouts Sanwell registered from the general pandemonium did nothing to hearten him; to the contrary, they seemed thin and hopeless cries. There was a second, lower tone bubbling through the shoving and rushing crowds, a more terrible fear under their immediate panic. This was not just an attack: this was the beginning of a war, and they were losing. Kroog might die, and with it, all Yotia.

The closer they got to the northern districts, the thinner the crowds were, and the louder the sound of fighting. Fewer bells rang here, but they were still audible, echoing in from the other districts still hurrying to evacuate. The closer the pilots came to the northern district, the more bodies they came across as well. At first they were the crumpled forms

of people who had been trampled in the early rush to flee; by the time the pilots reached their rendezvous point, they started to encounter the bloody and burned dead—soldiers and civilians both.

"Hold here, pilots!" Llora shouted, calling them to a halt. The five pilots and their avengers came to a stop in an abandoned market plaza. Overturned stalls and stands scattered bright sprays of spices, fruits, and vegetables across the ground. A small fire licked the charred ruins of a storefront where a food seller's cart had tipped over, spilling hot coals into the shop's dry interior. People had fled in the middle of their morning routines, leaving everything behind.

At the far end of the plaza was a hasty but substantial barricade defended by at least two dozen Yotian soldiers, soot-stained and bloodied after retaking the plaza. The barricade would not hold off a dragon engine, but it would deter any human soldiers from attacking. The Yotian squadron looked to the avengers with hope, and their pilots with concern. Sanwell tried not to look at the pile of dead Yotians, civilians and soldiers both, that lay in a heap next to the small fountain at the center of the square. Debris fluttered in the hot wind stirred by the raging fires.

A scatter of dead Fallaji troopers splayed out unceremoniously on the far end of the plaza, arrow shafts sticking from their bodies.



Llora talked with the ranking officer there—a lieutenant, by their stripes; the captain Tawnos had assigned the pilots to had been killed. Sanwell figured the lieutenant to only be a year or so older than he, though it was hard to tell under their heavy armor.



*"Yotian Tactician", by Fariba Khamseh.*

Sanwell overheard the lieutenant say that this had been a second-line medical post before a bitter fight contested the small plaza. The Yotians now planned to use the plaza as a staging ground for the counterattack:

Stacks of firebombs, arrows, and darts stood near the barricade. Occasionally a runner would come sprinting into the square, haggle with the supply officer, and then run back with a bundle of firebombs tossed over their shoulder or a healer in tow.

"Pilot Sanwell," Llora called, waving him over. "Sanwell, this is Lieutenant Markos—" Llora's introduction was drowned out by a roar loud enough to send everyone in the plaza diving for cover. A long, buzzing series of explosions followed moments later, reports echoing out over the city.

The bells nearby fell silent. Sanwell and the rest of the pilots, Llora included, stayed prone, their avengers watching over them. Some of the soldiers pushed themselves to their feet, gathering up their spears and adjusting their sword belts, peering over the barricade, crawling back to their posts.

The brick was dry and hot. Sanwell clutched the control rod to his chest. The thumping of his heart against the ground matched the rumbling of the nearby dragon engine on the move.

The bells began to ring again and Llora stood, hollering at the pilots to get up. Lieutenant Markos bellowed at the rest of his soldiers to get to the walls. Sanwell stood on trembling legs, helped up by Rica and Carlo. The two younger pilots stuck close to Llora and had already sent their avengers to the barricade.



Big, booming explosions crashed through the plaza, sending whistling and skittering shards of metal into the air. Sanwell flinched as a chip of plaza brick leapt up and cut his cheek, flung into him by something pinging off the ground as it flashed past him.

Shrapnel—the Fallaji were attacking!

Sanwell, rooted to the spot, watched as Yotian soldiers hurled firebombs over the barricade toward the charging, unseen Fallaji. Smoke and bright flashes followed, explosions thundering and echoing off the storefronts, raining glass and clouds of dust on the street opposite the barricade. Screams mixed with the rising cry of charging Fallaji as they returned fire, launching heavy crossbow bolts and whistling arrows at the Yotians. Sanwell ducked just in time behind Sword One's extended arm, cringing at every whining ping that rattled off the avenger's armor.

Above it all loomed the dragon engine. Mishra's engine. Sanwell saw through the smoke the heat-warped visage of the titanic machine, reptilian, a beast of artifice and war towering high above the building tops of the northern district. It roared, hungry, cruel, alive, and advanced toward them, shrouded once more in the thick smoke.

"Sanwell!" Llora shouted to be heard over the cacophony of combat. "Take Rica and Carlo down that side street," she ordered, pointing with

her sword down a narrow alleyway. “Find a way to flank the engine and bring it down, pilot!”

“Yes sir!” Sanwell saluted. He started to ask for more direction, but Llora had already hurried toward the wall, a bandolier of firebombs thrown over her shoulder.

“Get your Swords,” Sanwell said to Rica and Carlo. “Let’s go kill a dragon.”

Sanwell led the charge down the side street following Sword One. Rica and Carlo followed behind, Swords Two and Three in tow. The sound of battle at the plaza barricade surely gave their movements some cover. They moved quickly, not quietly.

They made it halfway down the alley before the dragon engine fired a blast into the plaza behind them.

A roar like the sky splitting open, a rippling crescendo of explosions. The boiling red mist scoured the plaza, blasting apart the Yotian barricade and incinerating its defenders.

Sanwell, Rica, and Carlo turned, looking on in horror as the crimson blast swept across their narrow view of the plaza. Llora and the other pilots, Lieutenant Markos and their soldiers—gone in a breath.





*“The Fall of Kroog”, by David Auden Nash.*

The smoke lingered, not moving despite the stinking, howling furnace-blast wind. The air itself sizzled, writhed in pain, crackled with heat-tortured bolts of lightning.

A body staggered into the alleyway from the burning plaza. None of the pilots could tell who it was. The poor soldier bounced off the alley wall, stumbling like a drunk, and collapsed, shattering into ash where they hit the ground. All thoughts of revenge and glory quit Sanwell then; worry stopped gnawing and started consuming.

The plaza echoed with the sound of charging boots: soldiers emerged from the boiling smoke, helms slammed shut against the burning air, their anti-mech spears raised toward Swords Four and Five. Their pilots gone, blasted and heat-warped by the dragon engine's burning breath, the machines nevertheless held their ground, swords flashing. A handful of soldiers died, but the avengers were torn down to cheers. They had slowed Mishra's engine for a moment, and the greater advance of his forces not at all.

A moment. Sanwell remembered the years of training; it bought those other pilots, whose names he never knew, a moment.

Carlo started to scream and neither Sanwell nor Rica could get him to calm down. There was no telling whether the Fallaji could hear them, but they couldn't take the risk. Rica tore open a linen bandage from his medical kit and tied it around Carlo's mouth while Sanwell held him steady. The two of them dragged Carlo away into the darkness of the alley, praying that the dragon engine would not follow.

Their sword avengers followed, ash piled on their armored shoulders.

...

Sanwell and Rica, with an alternating mute and screaming Carlo in tow, followed their avengers through the alley into another small and nameless plaza. This one was a crossroads walled in by two- and three-story buildings on all sides. Their alley continued across the plaza; the crossing road was a proper carriageway, wide enough for three carts abreast. At one point in the morning it had been fortified by a barricade on the northern exit from the plaza, blocking access to the rest of the city against anyone approaching from the Mardun. Now the barricade lay in ruins. Yotian and Fallaji dead splayed across the smoldering wreckage, flies already making meals of them. A stray dog scurried away when the avengers and their pilots came running into the plaza.

Sanwell and Rica ordered their avengers to take up watch on the Mardun side of the crossroads, then staggered to the end of the square opposite the barricade, dragging Carlo with them. His avenger stood still at the end of the alley, awaiting orders. The three of them sat on an overturned cart and caught their breath. The dragon engine hadn't followed them. For the moment, in this quiet corner of besieged Kroog, they were safe.

"What do we do?" Rica asked.

"We can't fight the engine," Sanwell said. "Not even with our Swords—we'd need an army of them to fight that."

"So what do we do?" Rica asked again.

Sanwell looked back down the alleyway they had just emerged from, back toward the scoured plaza. He looked up, at the smoke-darkened sky.

The sun, so clear up by the orniary, burned a dim, sick orange. Ash drifted down, black and gray.

"We run," Sanwell said. "Like Tawnos told us—if we're in danger, we run."

Rica took his own survey of their surroundings. "Where?"

The dragon engine bellowed again, deafening, vision-shaking. Sanwell and Rica clapped their hands over their ears, eyes watering at the loudness of the roar. It passed, and like thunder from a moving storm, the two boys listened for its source; it appeared the dragon engine was moving away from them and their avengers, making for the heart of the city.

"Away," Sanwell said, a little too loud as his hearing slowly came back to him. "Anywhere but here. Didn't Tawnos say something about some town? Hinge?"

"Hench," Rica corrected. "Some caravan town, I think. A place for horses to get water."

"Maybe there," Sanwell said.

"We'd have to cross the city," Rica said, chewing his lip. "West might be better—we could run to the western gates and make for the coast, find a ship."

Sanwell hung his head. It pounded. He thought of his brother, Rendall—was he in the air by now?





*"Fallaji Vanguard", by Joshua Cairos.*

"Where would they send the evacuees?" Sanwell asked Rica. "Korlis or Penregon?"

"Korlis is closer," Rica said. "But they're merchants, and they're neutral. Besides, they don't have a standing army, just mercenaries. My guess is Penregon. It's farther, but that's where Urza and—"

A sudden clatter and a shout sounded from northern entrance to the crossroads—the Mardun side where their avengers stood guard.

Sanwell and Rica looked over to see a rank of Fallaji brasscaps approaching the crossroads. Behind them, Sanwell could see what looked like a forest of pikes under which shone the polished brass helms of a whole marching column of soldiers.

"Sanwell," Rica said, standing. He wasn't calling Sanwell's attention, only uttering. A reflexive gasp, spoken in disbelief at what he saw: the Fallaji army, unimpeded, marching toward them.

"Sword One," Sanwell cried. He stabbed his command rod toward the Fallaji and pressed the trigger. A thin beam of light visible only in the passing smoke dazzled the front rank of the brasscaps. "Attack!"

Sword One bounded toward the Fallaji, followed a second later by Sword Two. Carlo, catatonic, triggered his control rod, flashing the ground at his feet. Sword Three did not move; the machine had dropped into an idle, sword ready but not raised.

The marching soldiers were unable to form a pike wall before the two avengers crashed into them. The front ranks died in chaos, their pikes skittering off the avengers' armor plating. The two avengers worked their great swords with a butcher's efficiency, grinding the Fallaji advance to a halt at the ruined barricade.

Sanwell watched in horror and awe as the avengers cut through the brasscaps. The sound of their swords buzzing through the air, the heavy,



wet thunk of the blades meeting and separating flesh, smashing bone, crunching through the proud, bright Fallaji armor as if it were little more than thin foil. Sanwell could only stagger backward, command rod level and aimed, and watch the avenger interpret his most basic command. Sword One cleaved through the soldiers before it with expeditious strikes. Short chops, one manipulator holding the hilt of its sword and one along the blade to guide it.

Rica piloted Two with precision, directing his avenger toward officers and targets that presented a threat to their machines. Soldiers with heavy explosive-tipped lances and crossbows, officers with their command flags and steady voices—Sword Two, under Rica's command, hunted them through the chaos made by Sword One's assault.

Who taught Sword One how to fight?

Sanwell stabbed his control rod toward a pair of brasscaps who had made it around Sword One. He triggered the rod, dazzling its beam across the soldiers, and Sword One immediately interceded, impaling them both with one heavy lunge. Sword One lifted them and swept them off its weapon, sending their bodies tumbling into the still-advancing column.

At some point Sword One had to learn how to move like that, Sanwell thought, keying another target. He backpedaled, retreating with Rica, dragging Carlo with them, putting distance between them and the fight.

Who taught Sword One how to interpret his simple first command and translate it into movements Sanwell could not do himself? He had seen inside the older models as part of his training—they, like Sword One, were not alive. As he understood it, they could not think. They were machines, humanoid assemblies of a thousand complex calculations and delicate complications; thousands of hours of genius and technical acumen and human labor set to a single purpose, achieved with uncanny grace: to swing a sword and end a life.

Brilliance. Madness.

Sword One ejected its dull blade toward the advancing brasscaps, then drew a fresh razor from the magazine on its back. The avenger moved so smoothly that Sanwell could almost believe it was a giant person in armor, a warrior that could not be stopped by fear, pity, or fatigue. Spears and crossbow bolts shattered on Sword One's legs and deflected off its brachial and thoracic armor plates, each glancing blow driving home how indestructible the avenger was.

Another feeling mixing with Sanwell's fear: relief. Relief that the Swords were on his side.

An explosion boomed out over Sword Two's upper half, staggering the avenger into Sword One. Sword Once gracefully sidestepped its fellow, and Sword Two fell back into the plaza, landing hard enough to crack stone.



Rica swore and Sanwell saw why: a bomb had blown away Two's right arm. Hydraulic fluids and dark oil sprayed from the damaged equipment, pumping into the air until Two's internal systems shut off the flow. Drawing a fresh blade with its remaining arm, Sword Two struggled back to standing—but it was too late. The gap had been made.

The Fallaji brasscaps advanced, driven by their officers behind, cheering, hoarse, heartened by the blow dealt to Sword Two. Sword One tried to intercede but could not hold the road by itself. At first only a handful of brasscaps made it through; Sword Two tried to drive them back, but the Fallaji fired a hail of explosive bolts at its head and legs. The reports boomed on top of each other, pressure waves battering the wounded machine back to the ground. As it fell, soldiers swarmed Sword Two, stabbing bomb-pikes into its joints and between its armor plates, arresting its movement. On the other side of the yard, more brasscaps brought the idle Sword Three to the ground, anti-mech pikes stabbing and slicing vital internals, joints, and mechanisms.

Sanwell screamed something wordless, a mix of terror and fury, stabbing his command rod at the Fallaji, stabbing a dazzling beam at them again and again. No commands, nothing from his training, just giving voice to raw panic as the enemy flooded into the crossroads. Sword One fought on, as it was designed to do.



*“Disfigure”, by Svetlin Velinov.*

The brasscaps detonated their bomb lances and killed Sword Two. The avenger’s powerstone erupted, a bright flash that blanked the square with white light.

Sanwell went flying, blinded by the blast. Somehow he held on to his command rod, and as he lay on his back he blinked his vision back from burned to blurry. He could see Carlo laying still, near the overturned cart, uniform smoldering. He watched Rica push himself to his feet, his cheekbones and nose raw and burned. A sandpaper wind whipped through



the streets of Kroog, scouring Sanwell’s own burned face and hands. He cried out in pain, voice muffled as his hearing was slow to return.

The bells still crashed and rang. Other explosions thumped throughout the city.

Distant, screams.

Distant, the roar of dragon engines.

Sanwell’s world was a haze of cloudy, gray smoke under an ochre sky. The sun above was a dying marigold, fat and close, threatening to slip from the sky, an egg’s yolk sloughed from its white. Everything stank of burning wood, burning oil, burning flesh. Ash fell like snow.

When Sanwell was new to Kroog, dispatched with his brother as a child to learn artifice at the orniary, he’d been schooled in Yotian custom and belief. Cultural education, his parents told him. Necessary for any child of the east, for the young scions of civilization to understand the world they were destined to rule; in this education Sanwell learned that of the many gods of Yotia and their domains, no single one ruled over an underworld or accursed afterlife. A human soul was too myriad to be thrown into hell on the word of one god: damnation for the Yotians was not that simple. One had many souls throughout the course of their life, and each of them was afforded its own judgment.

Sanwell knew now that the Yotians had missed an aspect. They had forgotten a god somewhere in their celebrations: the one who'd damned his living soul to this city of hell. Sanwell imagined that morbid deity flying above the city on torn wings, belching crimson mist down into its burning streets.

"Sword One," Sanwell whispered into the command rod. "To me." Be it hell or nightmare, Sanwell wanted out.

Dark shapes stalked through the haze, though none cut the reassuring profile of Sword One. Lumpen silhouettes bent over their long spears, wide helms turning slowly, listening, searching.

Sanwell moved up to a crouch, slipping further back from the moving shapes. He padded past Rica and hissed for him to follow.

Rica shook his head and held a finger to his lips. He pointed, directing Sanwell's gaze.

Carlo. He crawled toward Sanwell and Rica. The burns across his back and legs were terrible, rendering him into a mess of blistered flesh and melted steel.

"San?" Carlo cried, sobbing. "Rica?"

Rica started toward Carlo, but Sanwell grabbed him and shoved him back.



The dark shapes in the brick haze stopped, listening. Their broad heads turned. Their spears probed the gently falling ash.

"Where are you guys?" Carlo cried again.

A flurry of crossbow bolts thudded into Carlo's back, killing him. A second volley peppered him seconds later, stray bolts pinging and ricocheting off the ash-covered ground. The brasscaps shouted, calling to each other the location of the dead pilot.

"Sword One, kill!" Sanwell shouted into his command rod, his voice cracking. "Kill!"

Rica turned, grabbed Sanwell, and shoved him to a run. Over his shoulder, Sanwell heard Fallaji soldiers screaming in terror under the rising whine of a laboring, wounded machine. He turned, backpedaling for three short steps, and saw Sword One's tall, armored form rising from the darkness.

Sword One was a heat-warped knight in yolk-yellow light, golden death splattered with soot and ash. Though horribly wounded, Sword One was not dead, and until it was it would obey Sanwell's last order. Blood-splattered, fearless, the terrible machine may have been another forgotten Yotian god: that of war and the crossroads, of machines and the age to come.

Sanwell threw down his control rod. There was nothing left to command.

"San!" Rica's hands clawed at Sanwell's collar, the other boy trying to pull him along. Sanwell stumbled but did not fall.

Together, the two boys ran.

Kroog died on a crimson morning; the war began at sunrise.



*"Demolition Field", by Kamila Szutenberg.*





Aiman lay on his back and squinted against the wan light of the marigold sun. The sky was a foul orange tint, deep as the burnt brown of a charred pepper where smoke from still-burning fires belched. Everything stank. Beauty curdled by death, sweet azure sky rusted over, bright bells twisted to screaming.

Aiman needed water.

The thudding thunder of nail-bottomed boots. A stampede of boots. Hundreds, thousands, a million, the whole of the world running by him. One kicked his head hard enough to tumble him over, as the waves once did. Argivian or Fallaji, he could not tell. The strap of his brasscap snapped and his helm bounced away. Some reinforcements, he thought, running to battle.

To battle!

Kroog, burning city, invaders' city, the city of thieves. Why were they there? Mishra, the snake-tongue, hungry, jealous. The qadir's greed.

Aiman needed water.

He groaned and tried to move, but when he tried to sit up all strength drained out of him. He coughed, wincing at the pain. He couldn't see well. He looked down his body.

Aiman let slip a weak cry of fear and shock. Three arrows. He'd been hit. One in his upper thigh, one pinning his arm to his chest, and another through his side. Thigh was the deepest, right in the meat. Arm was all the way through, but his arm and breastplate underneath had stopped the arrow from wounding him deeper. Side was little more than a deep cut, trapped in his armor and padded cloth underneath—once the arrow was gone, a clean bandage would be enough. His face throbbed, and a horrible split feeling told him he had been wounded there as well.

Aiman dropped back down.

"I need water," Aiman called out. "Water," he cried, and realized his was only one of many voices adding to a chorus of moaning, weeping, screaming wounded. He looked around, lucidity coming back with the pain.

He was in hell. Bodies packed the space between the buildings, filling the road where they had fought. The gullet of the city, through which soldiers of both kingdoms were ground into meat.

He tried to remember what happened. Some huge golden knight, some bright machine of terror. The column marching forward, shoved by the rear ranks, terrified of death ahead and Mishra's officers behind. Explosions, pain. The boats before that, his hands shaking, the quiet prayer of the soldier next to him, the cold of the river as they charged up the banks, the screams and the screams.



Aiman needed water. He needed to get away. Hands grabbed at him and a dead man moaned in his ear, begging for his mother. Aiman slapped the hands away with his good arm, gasping for breath. He kicked and scraped, scooting away from the pleading corpse.

Wheezing, Aiman crawled, yelping where the arrow shafts tapped and dragged over the brick. He collapsed against the side of the alley, shaking violently, vision graying.

"Water," Aiman moaned. He was dying. He could feel it. Burning, deep pain throbbed through his leg, his eye, his side—

...

Aiman woke up. It was nighttime. He had passed out.

The alley was silent. The dead draped over every surface. Fires lit the night, casting everything in the pit's own ochre glow. No more bells rang, though Aiman could hear the battle still raging in the distant quarters of Kroog.

Aiman moaned when he saw it. A ghost. A revenant, glowing a soft blue as it picked across the fetid alleyway. Aiman started to pray.

The ghost looked over at him.

Aiman's prayer caught in his throat.

The ghost walked toward him, dim blue form tracing an echo through the hot evening air behind it. Death, Aiman knew it. This was death itself, claiming souls to journey with him.

Death crouched above a horribly wounded man. The man's chest rose and fell, hitched, and then deflated. Aiman could hear the rattle from where he hid.

Death stood. His head tracked across the alley, as if taking in the sight. A harvest, Aiman thought. A harvest for this cold reaper.

"Not yet," Death said. He spoke to the empty alley, but Aiman knew Death spoke to him. Death had a strange accent, like something from the far east. As a boy Aiman had tended his father's trading ship, sailing all around the bounds of Terisiare. Penregon's austere harbor had been a regular enough stop, and Aiman had picked up some Argivian; Death's language sounded similar.

"We're too early," Death said. "We're years away, decades at least. It doesn't happen here."

Relief and confusion flooded through him. Aiman let himself hope.

Death sighed, and then Death disappeared.



...

Two weeks later, Aiman's fever finally broke. He limped out of the airy medical tent, the right side of his body aching and itching, but healing. He had lost an eye, but save for that wound he would suffer no more than puckered scars where the arrows had pierced him.

The dry desert breeze cooled the sweat on his brow.

Aiman's war was done. His life, he knew for certain, was only beginning. He looked up at the pale blue sky, tracked thin clouds in their heights, and watched the birds wheeling.

Death had told him: not yet.

# EPISODE IV
# The Ink of Empires

TEN MILES FROM TOMAKUL. TRENCH RATS.
REPLACEMENTS. THE NIGHT SPLITS OPEN.
TEN MILES FROM TOMAKUL, AGAIN.

— 44 AR —

Ten miles from the golden domes of Tomakul, Farid sat on the fire step of an old trench and used his knife to chip apart his frozen stew. Stoked with shattered arrow shafts and small wads of packing paper, the coals under the stewpot—his own brass cap, its liner removed—soon had the frozen slurry thawed and simmering. Without reverence, Farid shook the last of his salt out of a small tin into the broth, stirred, and felt his stomach twist with hunger at the thin scent of wild garlic and onions. The smell drew the rats out of their holes as well, but the cold made them sluggish. Farid watched one creep toward his rag-wrapped boots and stop to sniff him. It was fat, large as the golden cats that lounged in Tomakul's temple district streets, and carried itself with the same languid, waddling confidence. The rats owned the trench; the humans huddling in it were just temporary occupants, and food if they died. Farid kicked it away.



*"Brushland", by Thomas Stoop.*

Their trench neared two decades old, a relic of the early war expanded into something resembling the great earthworks Farid had seen during the retreat out of the trans-Mardun territories of Yotia. Down where the Mardun river bordered Kroog, they had trench lines reinforced with squat stone towers. Bunkers that hid heavy bolt-throwers, subterranean hospitals and mess halls, weather-sealed bunks that were lit and warmed by smokeless powerstones. But all that was a year and miles behind him,



abandoned after the Argivians and their allies began their counterattack. Life on the Mardun front was cold and boring until it wasn't.

Farid's war had been one year-long walk home with mechanized death at his back and pestilence where he slept. Every illusion he had of glory, honor, and adventure was ground to pulpy meal, pressed into the mud along with honor and humanity. Each trench Farid's unit had retreated to had been older, shallower, and found in greater disrepair. When the war was last this close to Tomakul there had been no machines, just footsol-



*"Farid, Enterprising Salvager", by Bruno Biazotto.*

diers and cavalry; only the qadir's closest advisors knew what a mak fawa was, no one had seen an avenger, and Farid hadn't yet been born.

When Farid and his unit first tumbled into this trench, exhausted and bloodied by the Artificer's cavalry, they found it a shallow ditch that stretched for a handful of miles across the valley floor, flooded, home only to the rats and the dead. They dug down into the earth, bailed out the water, and reinforced this old line for the realities of modern warfare. Now it was home, with underground dugouts to hide from 'thopter bombers on clear days, sapper-dug traps to sink advancing avengers and triskeletons into the mud, and thickets of needle-wire strung across the front-facing side to tangle any charging enemies.

A month of cold work and thin living followed. Talk burbled through the trench of an attack, but Farid did not put too much stock in talk. Soldiers talked; attacks were slow, grand things these days. They needed soldiers to replace the dead and reinforce the living and officers to holler and shine. Thankfully, it seemed the generals never wanted to attack unless they had at least one dragon engine, or a division of the qadir's own machine soldiers to try and break the enemy line.

So Farid cleaned his spear, kept his boots patched, rotated his socks, and cooked. This morning it was a stew. When it was ready Farid poured a portion into Karrak's cup first, then the rest into his own. Farid nudged



his friend, who sat wrapped in two cloaks, staring at the opposite wall of the muddy, frost-webbed trench.

"Food," Farid said. He had to shove Karrak again before he noticed. Karrak looked over, coughed, took the stew, and ate.

Farid blew on his own cup, sipped, and let the warm broth filter through him. He chewed a chunk of sodden bread and watched as a line of soldiers tromped around the sharp corner of the trench. They walked in single file, shuffling along the plank floor to keep their boots free of the rimy mud underneath. Eyes downcast, the soldiers all looked the same. The mud here dried pale, caking their boots and wool uniforms, staining the once-fine colors of the Imperial Fallaji army from dusty reds to cold shades of white, tan, and brown. All wore their helms wrapped in dark cloth, to prevent the sun from shining off the polished brass. They walked as a shudder through the trench, short-stepped to not clip the heels of the soldier in front, shuffling to not be clipped by the soldier behind. Some leaned on their spears as they walked. All bowed under the weight of their packs.

"Hey," Farid said, calling up to the soldiers marching past. "Where are you going?"

None of them answered. Few even acknowledged him, and those that did just looked him over with fatigue-sunken eyes while they shuffled

by. An older soldier whose coat bore a set of sewn on sergeant's stripes passed, and Farid called out to her, asking where they were headed.

"Making room," the sergeant said. She stopped to adjust her pack, perching on the fire step. "Replacements due in this afternoon."

Farid cursed. Replacements. "They human?"

The sergeant shook her head. "All we were told was to make room for 'em. You have any more of that soup?"

It was Farid's turn to shake his head. "Just broth and bones now. What do you have?"

The sergeant thought for a moment, then fished into her coat. She pulled out a golden coin and held it out to Farid. It was one of the old ones, thick, with the last qadir's face stamped on both sides.

"For when you go home," the sergeant said. "Live like a qadir for a day in Tomakul, or an emperor for a week anywhere else."

Farid offered the sergeant the remains of the broth. She drank it down in a sip, then held the makeshift stewpot tipped to catch the last drops.

"Here, take this," Farid said, passing the sergeant one of the broth bones when he finished. "It's chicken, not rat."



"Chicken! Where did you find one of those?" The sergeant, grateful, took one of the bones.

"That miracle I cannot reveal," Farid said. "The quartermaster would have my head for it." He held a gloved finger to his lips, then pocketed the rest of the chicken bones in a pouch he wore at his waist. "Keep the coin. When you're qadir for a day, send us somewhere warm to dig a trench."

The sergeant laughed. She set the coin down on the fire step next to Farid anyways.

"For when you're home, my boy," the sergeant said, smiling.

Farid saluted. The sergeant nodded and hurried on to join the rest of her regiment as they shambled away. The unit passed through the trench for a few more minutes, the marching soldiers silent but for coughing, the creaking and squelching of the trench's soggy floorboards. The wounded brought up the rear of the column—those who could walk, who could still carry and thrust a spear were sent back to the front—shuffling with their heads down and eyes distant.

"A sorry lot we are," Karrak said. He'd come back from his distant staring. A wet cough roughened his voice. "Are you going to take that gold?" he asked Farid, eyeing the coin the sergeant had left on the fire step.

Farid looked at the coin. The sun had started to burn away the mist, and the gold gleamed in the cold morning light. He passed it to Karrak, who bit it and checked the impression. Satisfied, he tucked it into a pocket deep in his coat.

"Replacements, he said?" Karrak grunted.

"Replacements," Farid agreed.

"I hope they're machines," Karrak said. "Some of Mishra's. Not those dead things." Karrak coughed. "No more meat for this beast."

"I say give us the dead ones if it means we can go home," Farid said. "Let the qadir and his brother fight this war with their toy soldiers."

Karrak shrank into his coat and shivered. Farid reached out an arm and pulled him close. He could feel the heat Karrak threw off, like a brazier filled to the brim with coals. The same plague that had savaged him just two weeks prior, Farid guessed.

An officer–a captain in a pristine uniform but for mud-stained boots-brought up the rear of the marching soldiers. Farid noticed him a second too late. Cursing, he stood. Karrak struggled, but Farid hauled his friend up and held him as the captain marched past. The two of them saluted and the captain ignored them, consulting instead a sheaf of orders that a runner had passed him. The runner, a youth in a similarly pristine uniform, paced alongside, hopping between the firestep and the plank walkway above the muddy trench floor, taking notes as the captain rattled off orders to be dispersed to various units up and down the line.



Farid and Karrak and the rest of the men in their section stood for as long as it took for the captain to pass. When the officer turned the corner and was out of sight, they sat back down on the firestep, slouched back into their dugouts, and curled back up to sleep.

Winter's deep chill sank into Farid. He watched over Karrak as his friend shivered. Officers, movement, replacements and reinforcements—activity. Nothing good could come of activity. Activity meant action, and action meant going over the top, into the blades and fire of the machines.

...

The replacements arrived the next day, stooped under their heavy packs, yet to be lightened by the practicalities of war. They were human, not Mishran automatons or those stinking mechanical corpses; a mix of old men and women, out-of-place youths drawn from the furthest corners of the empire, haggard soldiers ferried over from the newly pacified Sarinth, and convicts. The replacements tromped through the trenches, eyes down, under the silent stares of the soldiers long on the line.

Some looked to Farid as if they came from Tomakul, though most of the replacements seemed to be desert types: thin before the front, either

swallowed by their uniforms or barely able to fit into them. A scattering of Zegonians passed, talking in their quiet tongue. A pair of broad, tattooed Sumifans marched past, a nervous song on their lips that left a taste of ozone on the air. A penal unit marched by at a quick step, closely watched by their broad and rough-tongued minders, the lot of them simmering with such a mix of fear, desperation, and brutality that Farid was glad to see them continue down the line, not stopping at his post.

Some of the replacements carried themselves with an air of defiance, but most peered out at the brasscaps with wide eyes, all pity and fear; the front never looked like what you wanted it to. Farid recalled that he had expected to see knights and champions and all that when he first arrived; instead, he found a city compressed into a canal of gray stone and mud a dozen yards wide and miles long, populated by fearsome and beautiful warriors with equally fearsome and beautiful weapons, all arranged toward the glittering Mardun and the ruins of Kroog beyond the river.

Truth was, the front was hell: a nightmare made by men. You dare look too long at its population and you'd see what you would become: hollow-eyed and sinewy, caked with mud. Gaunts in uniforms bleached and patched and stained. Farid was glad that moment was behind him. Better to already be the ghost.

At last, the officers came. Lieutenants by their stripes and sashes, shepherding the replacements to their new posts. The young officers carried



that Tomakul sturdiness about them and, unlike the soldiers they led, actually wore brass caps and goldcloth-trimmed rose cloaks. Their armor was polished, and they still carried swords. Farid, broke away from the marching mass of soldiers with a squad of replacements in tow.

"Soldier," the lieutenant called to Farid. "What company are you in?"

Farid stood from the fire step and brushed his trousers flat. "D Company," he said, saluting. "3rd Tomakul Spears, commanded by Colonel—"

"Sure, fine, that'll do," the lieutenant said. "These are yours, spearman." The lieutenant waved the squad of replacements forward. "Welcome to D company of the 3rd Tomakul Spears," he said to the replacements. "That spearman will be your senior here," the lieutenant said, pointing to Farid. "Look to him for guidance. I'll be in the officers' dugout that way," the lieutenant waved down the line. "Parade is an hour after dawn tomorrow under the company flags. Dismissed." The lieutenant tugged his brass cap, adjusting it, and then squelched off through the muddy trench, leaving the replacements to Farid.

As soon as the young officer was away down the trench, Farid swore, slumped free of his rigid parade stance, and waved the replacements over. Ten men—mostly youths a few years younger than him and an ancient veteran missing an eye—walked together in a rattling clump of brown wool coats, packs, and long spears.

"Welcome to the Argivian Front," Farid said. "I'm Farid of the Tomakul. This here is Karrak of the Suwwardi," Farid said. "The rest you'll meet at some point. D Company has been thinned after the last retreat, which is why you're here. Talk to the quartermaster down that way, she'll get you your regimental patch and some thread to stitch on the company letter," Farid thumbed down the trench, and the replacements all turned to look. "Any of you from Tomakul? Or are you all from the desert tribes?"

The group nodded. The older veteran stared forward with his good eye. He had the same look as Karrak—he was anywhere but here; he was nowhere at all.

"I'd never been out of the city before the war," Farid said to the assembled replacements. "Never been out in the deep desert—I heard it got cold at night, but never expected this. At least the Mist Moon is a great beauty." Farid looked around at the wide-eyed replacements. Nothing there but fear. "Why are you standing?" He said to them. "Grab a seat, find a bunk."

There were little cavities and burrows dug into the trench wall and reinforced by planks, their muddy floors covered with strips of burlap and torn clothing taken from dead soldiers. The replacements scrambled to grab the good ones. Each vacant dugout burrow had housed someone who went over the wall and never came back, and the dead always left small trinkets behind; if you were lucky you might find something valuable to trade to the quartermaster for smokes or nabiz.



"Have you seen the enemy, sir?" one of the younger replacements asked as they settled into the dugouts. "The Argivians and their machine devils?" The replacement swam under his brown, undyed cloak. He carried a spear, around the blade of which a thin ribbon of rose silk was tied. Farid first thought it a favor from a beloved that the boy had tied on, but as he looked at the replacements' weapons he realized they all had a similar ribbon fastened to their spears. That was the new mark of regiment, Farid realized. No more brass caps for the brasscaps. The boy, like the rest of the replacements, wore only a soft field cap with flaps tied down over his ears instead of the proud helms Farid and the rest of the long-deployed soldiers had been issued. They must need the metal for more automatons, Farid figured.

"I have seen them," Farid said. "Their machines as well."

"How many have you killed?" the replacement asked, eager.

Farid thought for a moment, recalling what he could of his year on campaign. He shrugged. "I don't think I've killed any."

"What?"

Farid looked to Karrak. "Have you killed any Argivians? Any Yotians?"

Karrak, always bundled, shook his head. "None," he rasped from his wrappings. "I seen many dead. Never killed one myself."

"Come to think of it, I've never even clashed with one blade-to-spear," Farid said. He flashed the long knife he wore at his side, then nodded towards his can opener—a sturdy pike about as tall as he, with a flat head that tapered to a sharp point.

"These are can openers. We use them on Urza's machines—though I've only ever used mine on fallen avengers and 'thopter wrecks," Farid said. "Closest I've been to using these in a proper fight was when we followed a unit of scythe runners into a trench. All the Argivians were dead by the time we arrived."

"Seen many dead," Karrak agreed.

"Told you," one of the other replacements said, nudging his fellow. "Trench rats," he said. "Disgraceful cowards. No wonder the Argivians have pushed us so far from Kroog—nothing but soft city-dwellers between them and the heart of our empire."

Farid and Karrak laughed. Some of the other soldiers who had been eavesdropping chuckled, shook their heads, and continued resting, eating, or maintaining their worn equipment.

"The Argivians are only two hundred yards that way," Farid said, thumbing over his shoulder in the direction of the Argivian trench. "You want to storm their line? Wait another hour—the rising sun will be at your back



and then you can strike like the midday sun on the head of a waterless traveler," Farid said.

"That—that is exactly what we should do!" The replacement spluttered. He was the bravest of his companions, but they all nodded along with him. "Why are we not driving them off our land?"

Farid stood from the fire step and stepped toward the young man. "How old are you?" he asked, sizing up the youth.

"Fifteen," the replacement said, looking to the side but not stepping back. The boy stood an inch or so taller than Farid, who affected a permanent stoop after this time in the trenches.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Assad."

Farid drew his knife. Assad stepped back, bumping into his companions.

Farid grinned, then turned and stabbed his knife deep into the plank wall of the trench behind him. He levered out a chunk of rotting wood, sheathed his knife, and reached into the earth. He pulled a double handful of clay out from the cavity, dug a few scrapes deeper, and then wrenched something from deep inside the trench wall. He turned and held out a rag-wrapped length of bone, matted hair still clinging to the fetid remains.

"You're younger than this trench," Farid tossed the bone to the ground at the youth's boots. "But not by much." He pointed to the ragged, soggy bone. "Look at that bone. That was a person—can you tell me which uniform they wore?"

The youth stared at the bone and did not answer. The rest of his cadre were silent.

"This land doesn't matter," Farid growled. "You got a cloak?" Farid asked the group. They all nodded, some even grabbing the corners of the cloaks they wore to show him.

"Boots?"

Again, the youths showed Farid the plain but sturdy boots they all wore.

"Good," Farid said. "Listen to me and learn my lesson well: your cloak and boots matter more to you than this trench. If the Argivians make it through our wire, if their metal avengers lead the way, if it looks like we're going to lose this line, you grab your cloak and you grab your boots and you run." Farid kicked the bone off the planks and into the soggy mud of the trench floor. "There's always another trench. Might not always be another cloak or pair of boots." He waited until each of the boys nodded at him. "Good. Lesson over. You're dismissed."



The replacements shuffled away. One remained, not moving from where he stood: the old, one-eyed veteran. He leaned on his spear with the comfort of a killer.

"How long?" the old veteran asked.

"A year and some months as of the start of winter," Farid said. "Karrak here has counted three. You?"

"I lost my eye at the Siege of Kroog," the old veteran said. "Served in the supply corps for a year following, and then they sent me back to train new warriors."

"The Siege?" Farid whistled. "I was only a baby when Kroog burned." Farid waved the old veteran over to sit next to him on the fire step. "What's your name, uncle?"

"Aiman," the old veteran said, setting his pack down. Aiman's voice was low and soft. The old man looked around the trench line, taking it in. "The war has changed since I was last a part of it," he said. "More mud." He fixed his good eye on Farid. "You are still so young."

"The qadir's war," Farid said. He looked away and spat. "We all must do our part."

...

Weeks after the arrival of the replacements, lieutenants and captains hustled up and down the trench line with trails of supply and logistics officers in tow. Grumbling and muttering quartermasters were forced to distribute tins of armor polish, new gloves, squares of cloth with which the spearmen were meant to patch their crimson cloaks, bolts of silk, and other useless things. They also doled out extra rations of nabiz and mutton which were well received by the young replacements, who did not know what extra rations of wine and mutton meant. In the mornings, the soldiers were woken by runners and their sergeants for parade formations, ordered to line up as best one could in the narrow confines of the trench for presentations to the majors and colonels who walked with scarves held to their noses through the places where the soldiers lived.

Farid, Karrak, and Aiman knew this was not routine. The young, fresh replacements did not. They all thought this was a mighty refutation to Farid's chilly warnings made only days prior. Assad let Farid know as much after their section was dismissed following this morning's inspection.

"Not so bad, this life," Assad said, overloud, to the coterie of conscripts that followed him. "You just need to lose that city softness, you see?" He exhaled a powerful breath, sending a plume of steam roiling out into the cold morning air. He beat a fist against his firm stomach. "Carry that desert heat in your belly and love for our empire in your heart, and you'll never see a sad day in this mighty force," Assad said. "Our qadir means to



set us on the attack again." He looked to Farid, smiling. "And I think everyone here should clamor to cover himself in glory after this last year of defeat. Only way to wipe away that shame is to put Tomakul to our back and send the Argivians running, right boys?"

A cheer went up among the replacements and—to Farid's dismay—even among some of the soldiers who had been on the line for months now. Fool's courage, second only to fear, spread quick as fevers. Only those who had been on the line for an actual attack and lived resisted the fervor.

Farid did not engage with Assad. He was not a fighter; besides, he had plans to make.

That evening, Farid, Karrak, and Aiman huddled together in a deep dugout and spoke in hurried whispers over a single low candle.

"Tonight, before dawn," Karrak said.

"Right," Farid said. "The attack is certainly coming by the end of the week. We need to go tonight."

"And how will they know to expect us?" Aiman asked.

"That I can't tell you," Farid said. "Not yet."

"Fine," Aiman grunted. "Whatever gets me through it, I won't complain."

"Good man," Farid said.

"If it must be tonight, then who do we trust to bring in?" Karrak, whose fever had finally broken, spoke around the warm smoke of the trenchroll he smoked. He offered it to Farid, who shook his head. Aiman plucked the roll instead.

"Not Assad," Aiman said. "He reminds me too much of the ones who I fought with at Kroog. All muscle and no think."

"Jamal?" Karrak offered.

"Jamal could be good," Farid agreed.

"He's quick," Karrak said. "And quiet."

"No," Aiman said. "Jamal is Sarinthian. The qadir only just suppressed their rebellion," Aiman said. He shook his head. "I like Jamal, but no one outside the unit will trust him. If we get caught out there with a Sarinthian…" Aiman drew his thumb across his throat.

"Right, good point." Farid sighed. He ran a hand over his shorn head. "Damn it, Karrak. Why do we have to take someone new?"

Karrak shook his head. "Sergeant said we have to take someone new to make it look convincing. Says the lieutenant told him that the colonel has ordered night patrols to be teams of four." He shrugged. "If it's just the three of us, we look suspicious."



"Fine," Farid said. "Four it is."

"Ehsan," Aiman said. "Ehsan is nobody. He'll do as he's told and stay quiet after."

"Ehsan?" Farid looked to Karrak, who shrugged. "Perfect," Farid said. "Aiman, you go get young Ehsan."

Aiman nodded and touched his brow. He scooted back from the candle and pulled himself out of the dugout. Farid and Karrak listened to the sound of his boots tromping away down the trench. When they faded and they were alone, Karrak finally spoke.

"Can we trust Aiman?"

Farid looked up at the canvas flap that covered the entrance to their dugout.

"I trust that he wants to live," Farid said. "Same as you and me and everyone else the war didn't kill yet."

"Just as well," Karrak grunted in a tone Farid knew to mean agreement. "Aiman knows who the real enemy is."

A commotion outside broke the long silence that followed. Boots thudding past on the plank flooring of the trench, excited murmurs and cursing. A shout.

Karrak started to his feet, hand to the long knife at his belt. Farid darted past him, bursting out into the trench in time to collide with a group of soldiers jogging past. They all tumbled to the ground, cursing and blaming each other for their clumsiness. Trading shoves, they pulled each other to their feet and parted. Farid hollered curses at the soldiers as they hustled down the trench; they shouted curses back, but they continued on down the line.

"What's going on?" Karrak asked, poking his head out from the dugout. Not an attack—if there was an attack it would be much louder. This was something else.

"I don't know," Farid said. He stepped to the side as more soldiers jogged past. "Something down that way, maybe a fight, maybe some new war machine." Farid offered his hand down to Karrak. "You coming?"

Karrak laughed and ducked back inside their dugout, twitching the curtain closed behind him. A no, then. Farid buttoned his coat against the evening's chill and joined the stream of curious troopers heading down the trench, shuffling along with them through the zigs and zags and blast-breaks. Though the sun had only just set and the world above the trench still clung to the day's light, the belly of the battleworks were plunged already into deep night. The trench's lights hummed on and burned dim, banishing the umbral dark with warm, blood-red light. To Farid that light–



meant to save their vision in case of a nighttime assault–always made everything seem darker. To this moment it added a special horror.

Muttering filtered through the close-packed soldiers ahead. A pair of troopers crouched at the lip of the trench, offering their hands down to help haul any who wanted up. Whatever drew this crowd happened behind their line; it was not the Argivians.

When it was Farid's turn, both soldiers hauled him up. They were silent, grim-faced, ashen. Farid did not ask questions. The last fingers of light bled below the horizon. Dozens of soldiers stood a short distance away, their breath puffing white into the deepening night sky. Red and green lights flashed and slipped through the gaps in this wall of bodies.

Farid went alone to join them.

The stink hit Farid first. Like an open latrine pit before the sanitary corps got to it, or a battlefield thick with the dead. A weight to the chilly evening air. He pushed through the crowd, which seemed more than willing to part. Some of the soldiers even turned and started back to the trench, prayers tumbling from their lips.

The sound of chains and marching. The crunch of frosted ground trod over by hundreds of bare feet. The dim red and green nightlights topped poles carried by their minders, marker lights that the chained creatures followed. The dead ones. Farid thought he felt the blood drain from his

face. Transmogrants. Hideous, piteous things that were once human, now a rotting amalgam of flesh and machine.

Whispers spread through the line of onlooking soldiers as the transmogrants marched past not ten yards away. The work of Mishra's protégé, these things. The fate of any who died on the line, or those who passed of illness, or those who did not want to fight when the conscription gangs came to take them.

The transmogrants were chained together at their ankles with some distance allowed between them, but they moved at a uniform step, more perfect than any drilled line of human soldiers Farid had seen. In the dying light he could not make out many details of these horrors, but what he did see burned into his memory. He saw dead and graying skin, scoured from the cold and the sun, stretched and woven through dark metal. They walked without outward care of the cold. They carried no weapons, but wicked claws burst from weeping stumps. Bloodless flaps with dead tufts of hair pulled taught over polished metal domes. Chain veils hiding the ruins of faces, but not the hot breath puffing out from between the links.

Farid's stomach soured but he did not retch. The horror of what he saw made sense. It was the battlefield he knew, embodied in a decaying legion of killing machines. Farid pitied the people these things had been. He pitied himself. He turned to head back. By the time he reached the trench a short distance away, officers had already begun shouting and



bellowing at the soldiers to head back to their posts, lest they be volunteered for mechanical service.

The night was cold. Outside Farid's dugout, the trench was alive with movement. Soldiers quietly hustled by with crates of handheld bombs, replacement spearheads, bomb-lance tips, armor-piercing bolts, wire-cutters, spare powerstones, and various other ordinance.

An attack was coming. Farid guessed they would be ordered over the top within the week. He did not sleep, and neither did Karrak or Aiman. Instead, with Ehsan sitting confused but silent with them, the four spearmen huddled together over a dim candle and planned for a long night.

...

Farid, Karrak, and Aiman, with Ehsan between them, moved quietly and quickly through the trench, taking care not to disturb any of the sleeping soldiers. They carried only their knives, no spears, and left their brass caps behind, favoring instead dark clothing and soft, wool caps. Ehsan didn't ask any questions, though Farid could tell he had many. The boy was as quiet as Aiman promised he was, small and quick, likely no older than fourteen.

Farid carried one of the red-lensed nightlights. It was powered by a chip of old powerstone and burned dim enough to not call attention, but bright enough to dispel some of the trench's deep darkness.

"Wait here," Farid said, pointing the nightlight at a wooden sign. Aiman put his hands on Ehsan's shoulders to steady him—he was old enough to be the boy's grandfather, Farid thought. Karrak held a trenchroll between his lips but did not light it.

"Sergeant Usman," Farid whispered as he crept into this section of trench. He knocked quietly on the planks outside of each dugout, calling the sergeant's name. "Sergeant Usman, it's Farid of D Company, 3rd Tomakul Spears."

A rustle, and one of the dugout flaps flipped back. "You're late, Farid," the sergeant said, crawling out from his dugout. "I expected you an hour ago." Usman yawned, tugged his cap down around his ears, and crossed his arms for warmth. "Where are your men?"

"Here," Farid said. He looked back to Karrak, Aiman, and Ehsan and waved them over. The three of them moved quietly to join them.

"Good, four, good," Usman said, tallying the small group. "Here, one moment." Usman whistled between his teeth, a short and clipped sound that slipped quickly away into the night. Another soldier emerged from a dugout with an armful of soft satchels. Usman took them and passed them to Farid, who handed them out one by one to his companions.

"One full satchel for me and my boys, remember," Usman said, wagging a finger at Farid. "Or I talk, and you join the machines."



"Uncle, you'll be cheering when I return," Farid said, a quick smile on his lean face. "Do you have the order chit?"

Usman reached into his coat and pulled out a ring of thin, tin tabs. He snapped one off and held it out to Farid.

"You'll need to think of an excuse for why you're late and far from your unit," Usman said. "But that chit will make your story believable to any officer that might stop you."

"Outstanding," Farid said, reaching for the chit. Usman did not release it.

"One full satchel," Usman said. "If it's not bursting to the seams—"

"—you'll talk," Farid said. "It's not my first time, sergeant, don't worry. You'll have a full satchel by the dawn."

Usman released the chit. Farid pocketed it and Usman waved toward the fire step, where a ladder had been built into the trench wall. "We cut the wire this morning. Go up here and stay low. Whistle when you return."

"You'll hear a tune as pretty as the flowers of Tomakul," Farid said, turning from the sergeant. "Boys, let's go." Farid crossed the trench and tested the ladder. Finding it sturdy, he started to climb. Karrak followed, with Ehsan and Aiman bringing up the rear.

As Ehsan watched the other men's boots disappear over the lip of the trench, he hesitated. The boy looked back to Aiman, who he had followed close behind until now.

"Uncle," Ehsan whispered to Aiman. "Where are we going?"

"Quiet, boy," Aiman whispered.

"Are we going to fight?"



*"Swamp", by Sergey Glushakov.*



"No," Aiman said. "Now, up over the top—and be quick, we don't want any officers to see us," he said. He gave Ehsan a soft push, encouraging him to climb. "I'll be right behind you."

War had ruined Farid's faith, but he still regarded the world above the trench as hell. It was a place out of balance. Paradise was all things distributed in harmony and proper apportionment: the balances of stone, fire, sky, and water, imbued in one's body and soul, in the land and in dreams.

No-man's-land then was the opposite, a crucible into which people were fed and ghosts emerged. It was a hell of the body, the soul, dreams, and the land. It was colder up here than in the trenches: Every surface was exposed to the bitter valley wind and watching eyes of soldiers on both sides. Nothing remained of the forest that once filled this valley. The trees that hadn't been harvested before this valley became a battlefield were now to cinder-blackened stumps. The river that once coursed here had been dammed somewhere near Tomakul to deny the Argivians any of its bounty. Of the towns that once dotted the valley, only a single low, ragged stone wall remained. It was a landmark to the soldiers: how far from the wall has one moved in a year? How close to it?

Farid led his small group across this alien landscape, moving as quickly and quietly as he could while scurrying belly-low to the ground, guiding his party around the worst of the dead and the craters flooded with sour water. One crossed this hellscape by scrambling between craters and along

old and decaying plank walkways, laid by advancing forces in long-forgotten attacks. One plankway had its builders' corpses rotting alongside, festooned with order chits dropped upon them by soldiers from both sides, grateful for their sacrifice in making this place more navigable.

They reached their first landmark without incident: a downed bomber 'thopter, a heavy Argivian flying craft that resembled a fat-bellied bird. The four of them crawled inside through a rent in its thin metal fuselage.

"Damned cough," Karrak said. He wheezed, struggling for breath. "Farid, I don't know how you managed to do this after your fever passed—feels like my chest is bound in iron."

"Take a moment," Farid said. "All of you, take a moment to rest here."

"Like a wanderer gull," Aiman said, peering through the dusty glass of the 'thopter's crew compartment. "Great big birds that would soar alongside my father's ship." He spoke out loud, but to Farid it seemed as if he talked to no one but himself. Aiman looked through the wreckage toward the Argivian lines. "I never saw them land. I never thought they could."

"Where are we?" Ehsan said. His voice was still high and soft, very much a child's.

"Lower than the Nine Hells," Karrak grumbled. He set his heavy pack down on the damp floor of the 'thopter, groaning in relief at the weight



off his shoulders. One hand rubbing his throat, he clambered over to Aiman and tapped him on the shoulder. "Let me look, uncle."

Farid offered Ehsan a sip of his water. The boy took it, drank, and passed it back.

"About fifty yards that way—where Aiman and Karrak are looking—is the Argivian line," Farid said.

Ehsan looked bug-eyed toward the enemy lines.

"Don't worry," Farid said. "We're not going to attack"—he indicated the packs Karrak and Aiman carried—"we're going to trade. All we have to do is hang this flag here," he said as he pulled a short bolt of white cloth out from a pocket on his coat. "And wait."

"I don't think I've ever seen an Argivian before," Ehsan said. "I was wondering how I'd kill one without a spear—the officers said they're made out of metal, and all I have is this little knife."

"It's not the people you gotta worry about," Karrak said.

"They die quick as cut flowers," Aiman said, agreeing. "Same as us."

"We're not going to kill anyone," Farid said, quieting the group. "You can keep that knife hidden away, Ehsan. You won't need it, unless it is to cut chocolate or sausage."

Ehsan smiled at the mention of chocolate. Farid could tell it had been a long time since Ehsan last smiled. For that matter, it had been a long time since Farid had smiled. It took humanity to smile and mean it, and Farid had none. This was not a condemnation; it was an admission, a necessary act of survival. Tunnel your vision to the task at hand and survive.

The cold pre-dawn night was endless, stretching across this blasted valley from Tomakul to Kroog and beyond. It wormed into the hearts and desires of every bejeweled lord and power-hungry emperor, flooded their eyes like blood in milk, and eager they reared up and sent a million of their children to fuel the night's appetite, which was now indistinguishable from their own.

Farid was only one of millions. The princes of the world would see Ehsan's soul added to the butcher's tally and, unmoved, call for a million more.

He looked to Ehsan, reached out, and patted his cheek.

"You don't need to worry," he said. "You'll be fine."

And then an explosion boomed somewhere in the distance, followed by a series of sharp pops and long, sizzling whines. Spotting flares launched from both sides illuminated a section of trench and no-man's-land a mile and a half down the line, far enough that the light from the flares' ignition flashed a heartbeat before the sound of their detonation. They could



hear the echoes of distant screams somewhere down the valley but could not tell whose side cried out.

"Down," Farid hissed. He waved his palm down and put a finger to his lips. "Down, now!"

The four of them dropped to the shadowed belly of the crashed 'thopter, hands over their heads, and waited. The harsh, steady light of the parachuting flares cast stark and nightmarish shadows through the cracked and dirty glass of the ornithopter's crew compartment and bombing windows. That light was unrelenting, white and furious, the gaze of a god who only knew fire.

The thunder quieted. Not a battle, just a fight of no consequence. Farid let out a long and trembling exhale. He counted as the light from the flares faded and night returned.

"They're coming," Aiman said. He peered through the 'thopter's dusty glass canopy. "I see four of them at least, thirty yards distant."

"Just them, right?" Karrak asked. "No avengers? No walkers?"

"Just them," Aiman said. "Farid?"

Farid looked over to Ehsan, who had crawled into a corner, pale-faced and trembling. His hopeful smile gone. The boy knew he would never be fine. Even if by some grace Farid could resurrect this ornithopter and fly it

home, Ehsan would never be a child again. None of them could steal back what had been ripped from them. It was easy to become one of the next million, harder to resist the momentum of lords and emperors. Unless—

"Karrak," Farid said. "Go greet our friends."

...

The Argivians spoke some Fallaji, and likewise Farid, Karrak, and Aiman had some Argivian. Four Argivians clambered into the wreck of the bomber. One of them produced a canteen filled with some acrid spirit, Karrak broke out his trenchrolls, and the soldiers got to talking, joking, and swapping small things. Though hesitant at first, Ehsan soon joined the rest of them, and the eight soldiers together made a warm escape from the war. In the wreckage of the downed ornithopter, this small group may as well have been comfortable acquaintances at a cafe in Tomakul or a tea shop in Argive; if Farid closed his eyes, he could almost imagine a world outside of this one.

"I want to apologize for being late," the Argivian leader said in lightly accented Fallaji. She was a windbitten woman who reminded Farid of his mother. Stern, but he could see the laugh lines worn into her face. Laria, Farid remembered her name.



"Crossing our line was difficult," Laria said. "Lots of officers. Many new ones." She pointed to her eyes, and then to her group. "They don't trust us, so they watch."

Karrak grunted. "Sounds like officers," he said, speaking his own rough Argivian. "Always looking to use their swords."

The Argivians chuckled. Laria smiled. She looked past Farid and Karrak to Aiman and Ehsan, who, though part of the group, had kept quiet. "And who are they?"

"This is Ehsan," Aiman said, speaking before Farid could. The old man's Argivian, though accented, was perfect; he spoke with the comfort of one who had heard a language young and grown up with it close. "He's new on the line, from Tomakul. My name is Aiman. I am not new to the line, though I thought myself retired from the war many years ago after I was wounded."

"You speak our language well," Laria said. She switched to Argivian and introduced herself. Farid only caught a few words as she and Aiman carried on a rapid, gregarious conversation. Farid watched the two of them talk and felt a distant sort of hope. Aiman, like Ehsan, could still spark into the person he was before the war—the only difference was he had been through it before. The old man had been shoved into hell, all but torn to ribbons by the death machines there, and still knew how to make

someone laugh. His smile was not sweet; many of his teeth were missing and the scars that webbed out from his ruined eye tugged at the corner of his mouth. But it was a beautiful smile. Laria's quiet laughter was the sound of Farid's sisters and mother, kneading dough and sharing coffee.

This moment was good. The war didn't make this moment happen; it happened despite the war. Farid looked from Aiman's broken smile to Laria's graying hair, Karrak's gaunt face to the bandaged brow of the Argivian soldier he compared and traded knives with. Farid was not a poet, but the beauty of this moment sat with him. He committed to memory the tragedy of this little peace: their blood was the ink in which lord and emperors rewrote the borders of the world.

"It's nearing dawn," Laria said after some kind hours passed. The eight of them were well comfortable now, their helms discarded and packs piled, laden with the goods they all brought to trade. "We should get back."

Now, Farid thought. The mighty could not write without ink; rob them of their medium. "There is an attack coming," Farid said. "Our officers have been preparing an assault all up and down the line. The whole front."

Laria raised an eyebrow. She looked to her soldiers, who paused as they adjusted their packs.

"Farid," Karrak said, speaking Fallaji. "This could get us killed."



"Quiet," Farid snapped.

Karrak quieted, glowering. Farid ignored him and continued, switching back to Argivian.

"Our generals have moved in a whole regiment of transmogrants—the qadir's dead men," Farid said. "Those silks and kits we gave you? They passed them out to us just days ago. They've given us wine and meat. Brought in thousands of replacements from the across the Empire," he said, gesturing to Aiman and Ehsan.

Laria nodded. Any soldier this long on the line knew what extra rations and troop movements meant. "Thank you, Farid," she said. She looked to Aiman and spoke to him in Argivian, far too fast for Farid to understand. Aiman responded, Laria smiled, and with a salute she and her troops left the ornithopter.

"What did she say?" Farid asked Aiman.

"Clay statues," Aiman said.

"What?"

"Their general," Aiman said. "A man named Tawnos. He's an artificer in service to their Lord Urza. He has brought with him a dozen units of his Clay Soldiers." Aiman nodded toward the Argivian line. "Laria said they know our attack is coming. They've been preparing for weeks. They

have clay statues deployed all along their front. It's going to be a slaughter on both sides," Aiman said. "But if we stay back, she said, it will only be a slaughter of machines."

Farid exhaled. He had been holding his breath the whole time without realizing it. He looked to Karrak, who was pale.

"We have to keep this to ourselves," Karrak said. He looked to Aiman and Ehsan. "We can't tell anyone."

"I know," Farid said.

"If anyone else discovers that we know this," Karrak whispered, "we'll be hung as traitors if we don't die first."

"Yeah," Farid nodded. He closed his eyes and sighed. Pinched his brow. "Fine. We keep this between us, agreed?"

"Aye," Aiman said. He muttered a quick prayer.

"Agreed," Karrak said.

Ehsan said nothing but nodded.

"Good," Farid said. It was far from good, but it was enough.

As they crawled, silent and burdened, through the cold mud back to their trench, Farid wrestled with hope. What other choice do the disposable people of the world have? The men above them had weapons, gold, blessings from the gods—all that Farid had was his body. All he could do was refuse to be ink and try to save the ones that could still be pulled out from the night. The order to attack came two days later.



...

The officer's whistles thrust the cold morning into blinkered clarity. One purpose now: survive and advance. Farid flinched as another barrage of energy beams and shells rumbled overhead, whistling and screaming through the sky. The earth shook, his heart pounded against his cuirass.



*"Unleash Shell", by Campell White.*

The first wave had already gone over the top, only a handful from Farid's section tumbling back into the trench, feathered with bolts. The second wave stood ready on the fire step; Farid, Karrak, Aiman, and Ehsan stood in the final wave of the day, shoulder to shoulder with the other soldiers of D Company, 3rd Tomakul Spears. Stinking fear and shallow breath fogged the air above them. Someone retched, as someone always does. Farid's leg could not stop shaking.

A sound like thunder rumbled overhead, constant and bone-rattling. More heavy bomb-lobbers, catapulting shells overhead from somewhere well behind the line. Farid had seen those machines before: they looked to him like beetles with smokestacks bristling from their backs—cannons, the engineers and artificers called them. They had been firing for the better part of an hour now, pounding the Argivian line with explosions and shrapnel. Acrid smoke drifted back. Though he could not see from inside the trench, Farid could smell the raging, terrible fire. They would continue that bombardment until the first wave was nearly upon the Argivian lines.

An officer stood directly behind Farid, sword drawn, and bellowed about glory and honor and driving the Argivian dogs back to the Mardun. He promised the first soldier of his company to the Argivian trench a sack of gold coins, a commendation to any who captured an Argivian flag. If any cowards remained behind, he promised to have them taste Tomakul steel.



D Company's lives were packed onto their backs. If this attack was successful—which the officers demanded and assured them it would be—then they would move into the cleared-out trench. If they died, then it was easy for the quartermasters and supply officers to collect. D Company wore their coats, their long knives, brass caps if they had them or soft campaign covers if they did not. They carried their short spears and bandoliers of extra bomb-tipped heads, clubs, trench nails. Anything to make them better killers.

The bomb-lobbers fell silent, the last reports of shells roiling away down the valley.

Another whistle. The barking of sergeants and hollering of officers drove the second wave up from the fire step, up over the ladders, up over the lip of the trench and into the swirling smoke. No land beyond the lip of the trench, Farid thought as he stepped up to the fire step. He cheered along with the rest of the men, cheered until his throat hurt so the officers would not turn on him. Aiman bellowed, Ehsan's voice cracked and wobbled. Karrak cursed over and over.

They were next.

"What do we do?" Ehsan looked up at Farid, clutching his spear in a white-knuckled grip.

"We go slow," Farid whispered. It wasn't safe to talk here. "Stay with me. Be my shadow. Don't go anywhere I don't go. If I die, look for Karrak or Aiman." Farid looked down at Ehsan. "If you can't find any of us, get down and stay down until night. Don't fight, just stay alive."

Ehsan nodded. He shuffled closer to Farid, who put an arm around his shoulder.

"Ready up, spearman!" The officer behind them shouted, slapping Farid's arm with the flat of his sword. Farid cursed, sneered, and removed his arm from Ehsan's shoulder.

Shouts up and down the line. Runners hurrying with order chits. Officers clenched whistles between their teeth but did not blow.

The wind changed. The rotten stink of decay washed over the trench from behind as the officers shouted at their soldiers to pull on their masks. Farid and the rest of the Company tugged their muslin masks from their pouches and tied them on. The fabric was soft and did little to banish the eye-watering stink of the transmogrants. Freed of their chains, they trod in shuffling lockstep over narrow plank bridges laid across the trench. But for the sound of their bare flesh and metal feet thudding on the wood or squelching in the cold mud, they were quiet.

Farid, thankfully, was not under one of the bridges. He hazarded a look over to the nearest crossing and watched in horror as the transmogrants



advanced. Each was hideous in its own way; though mass-produced in some charnel factory, each one seemed a unique body, a one-off marriage of dead flesh and iron. They were each a nightmare.

Farid tugged his cloth mask into place and set his eyes straight to the ladder in front of him. When the whistle blew, he climbed, pushed along by those behind him. Near the top of the ladder, he reached up and took Karrak's hand, pulling himself up over the lip of the trench. He turned and helped Ehsan up, and then left the officer behind to fend for himself.



*"In the Trenches", by Daarken.*

The charge was slow despite the screaming of the officers' whistles and hoarse cry from the third wave. Smoke drifted over everything, shrinking their world down to a hazy ring a dozen yards in diameter. Farid, Aiman, Karrak, and Ehsan moved slowly forward, spears level, spaced only a few feet apart, marching rather than running toward the Argivian line. A dozen or so spearmen walked in rank alongside them, vanishing into the smoke on either side. An officer walked behind them, sword drawn.

"Steady boys," Farid said. "Steady. Watch your footing." A hot rain fell, mud and water tumbling down from the morning's mighty bombardment. Here and there they came across the fallen bodies of their comrades, torn and burned. Casualties of the shells that missed their mark and fell among their own ranks.

The charge across no-man's-land was a slow tumbling of balance and recovery. They slipped and slid across muddy craters and used their spears as walking sticks. Shouts rang up and down the line, drifting in from the smoke and along the advance. Together they crossed the crater field and passed by the ruined ornithopter. Ahead it was quiet, without the usual sound of battle. No cries of pain or fear, no shouts, no clash of metal on metal, no great booms and reports of bombs or the massive weapons of the machines. Just the crackle of fire, the soft rattling of their equipment, and the quiet encouragement of the officers behind.



They reached the Argivian trench and found it empty. Their bombardment had been effective and terrible, churning the well-engineered battlements into a mess of wire, burning wood, and abandoned equipment. Some lightly wounded Fallaji soldiers of the first and second wave sat smoking or resting on captured crates of Argivian equipment. They greeted the third wave with exhausted nods and sardonic cheers.

"Where are the Argivians?" a lieutenant screamed at the wounded soldiers. "Where is the enemy?"

"Front's moved," a wounded corporal said. She thumbed over her shoulder, down the valley toward the distant Mardun. "Rest of the 3rd went on that way. The Argivians are running back to Kroog."

The officer stamped and fumed, then ordered D Company to check the trench while he went to find out what he should do. Farid, Karrak, Aiman, and Ehsan went together, the four of them wandering off into a section of the trench that was largely intact.

They found it to be a mirror of their own. Dugouts and small chambers for soldiers to crouch and sleep in. Racks of weapons leaned together for easy access should an attack come. Plenty of small things left behind in the hurry to escape. Not a single soul remained. Farid found a transmogrant that had tumbled into the trench and snapped in half. He stabbed it with his spear, thinking to put the beast out of its misery, but it only grabbed the weapon and turned its eyeless gaze to him.

Farid released his spear and staggered back. The transmogrant shuddered, as if trying to stand, but made no sound. Aiman pulled Ehsan back from the transmogrant, wordlessly steering him away.

"Hey, Farid," Karrak called. He stood halfway in a dugout, speat tucked under his arm. "Look what I found." He held up a small packet of paper wrapping, secured with a shred of familiar fabric. Farid walked over and saw it was a strip of Fallaji silk–one of the sashes they'd traded with Laria and her soldiers.

"What is it?" Farid asked.

"No clue. Open it," Karrak said, offering it to him.

Farid took it. For a moment he worried it was a trap, but that moment passed. Karrak, Aiman, and Ehsan crowded him, curious. Farid tugged the silk free, stuffed it in his pocket, and then unwrapped the packet, revealing a small piece of chocolate, and a note.

Our gratitude, written in Fallaji script by an Argivian hand.

Farid smiled. A small and human thing. Ink, blotting the page.

The officers' whistles started up again. Forward, the order.

Eleven miles from the golden domes of Tomakul, the front was on the move once more.



— 44 AR —

Teferi appeared at night in a place very much like hell. Fire burned low on all sides of the spot where he snapped into coherence. He was grateful that as a spirit he could not smell what he saw: The dead were so closely packed that in some places there was no visible ground, only bodies atop bodies. Ruined machines ticked and cooled. Earthworks, once mighty testaments to engineering and human brilliance, were empty and abandoned. A battlefield at night, after some bloody price paid. Teferi looked around, grim-faced, and tried to get his bearings; the last two jumps had rattled him.

The Last Battle took place on Argoth, an island shattered and buried by the Sylex blast. Histories recorded by survivors elsewhere on Terisiare spoke of it as a verdant jewel, the last green place where the Brothers fought. This place was not that. A bit of wall stood alone in a valley stripped of trees and greenery, boiled to mud and crisscrossed by wire-bordered trenches. Fires burned on what surface it could eat. Not Argoth; likely somewhere on the mainland.

The knot of time around the Last Battle was a confusing morass of recursive loops, potentialities, and branching paths. Navigating them, even with the aid of Saheeli's brilliant Temporal Anchor, was a nightmare. Or Teferi thought it was, until he realigned here on this battlefield. This was the true nightmare. Worse even than the burning streets of Kroog. He'd

returned shaken from that experience, but time—even for him, and even with the Anchor at his disposal—was running out. He had to return, quickly.

Teferi guessed and, against Kaya and Saheeli's protestations, had engaged the Anchor once more, seeking the Last Battle in the manifold mess of time that was the Brothers' War. On paper his search was simple enough: find what he came to think of as "blotted time," where tens of thousands of lives met and came to an end. Blotted time looked to Teferi like holes chewed in a hanging curtain, or stars in the night sky. Its cause was great death—the infinite possibilities of all those lives ending in a moment, taking with them a piece of the great tapestry of time.

Time was running out; the moment Teferi sought was difficult to find. He was only one observer; he was not a god. All other possibilities were slipping away from him.

What did he know of the Last Battle? Urza brought a colossus of stone and iron, and it fought a titan of wood and resin and the dead of Argoth. Then Urza and the Sylex killed the world.

Teferi glided over the ground, giving himself a few minutes before heading back and trying again. He didn't see a stone colossus or a titanic forest creature, like Kayla's poem mentioned. There was no ocean. Only mud and the dead.



And the scavengers.

Teferi didn't see them when he first arrived, but he saw them now. Lone figures stalked across the field, bending every now and then to examine a body. Alone or in small groups they dragged bodies behind them, stacking them on carts that others wheeled off into the night. Some collected the ruined parts of fallen automatons, prying powerstones from sockets and working joints from shattered bodies.

"Who are you?"

If Teferi had blood, it would have run cold. He turned, slowly, and looked into the hideously augmented face of one of the black-robed scavengers.

"Are you the one from our dream?" the person whispered. They stepped forward, a deep whirring and clicking issuing from them. Their eyes were black chips of glass set deep into puffy, red sockets. Their mouth was lipless, toothless, replaced with a studded, tumbling cylinder that clicked thin metal strips as it turned. The sound was flat, soft, and hideous.

They did not seem to be in pain. Instead, it looked as if they were smiling.

Teferi drifted backward, avoiding the scavenger as they reached toward him. The hem of their sleeve fell away, revealing an arm that ended in a cluster of dozens of small, grasping manipulators.

“Brothers,” the scavenger screamed. “Do you see him?”

Teferi had seen enough. This was not the Last Battle, only a footnote lost in the great void on time’s tapestry that was the Brothers’ War.

It was time to go.



*“Disciples of Gix”, by Peter Polach.*

# EPISODE V
# As Cruel, As Necessary

KNOCK TWICE. HISTORY IS UNRELIABLE.
DON'T OPEN THE DOOR. HELL. YOUR PEDAGOGY
NEEDS WORK. NOT A TIME TO PANIC.

**— 4562 AR —**

Teferi lay shirtless in a cold metal coffin, counting his breath. How much time did he have before transmission? A minute at most, though it felt like an eternity.

A quick double knock on the lid of the coffin. Kaya, asking if he was ready.

It had been month and some days of testing, of venturing back an hour, a day, a week at a time, ensuring that nothing changed, that the secret phrases Kaya and Saheeli wrote down and planted days prior were accurately reported back to the present; a month of this and Kaya still asked if he was ready. If he was okay. Teferi smiled inside the coffin, a soft and sad smile. These new walkers were different from the ones he had come up with. More human—even if they weren't human.

Teferi knocked twice on the inside of the lid. He was ready.

A faint purple glow spread before him, brightening his vision with ultraviolet and deeper shades. A lightness tingled his fingertips, his toes.

A comforting thought, should he not return: Kaya would lead them all. She and Elspeth, and Jace besides. Good hands. Teferi exhaled and tried to get comfortable. He thought of Wrenn and her songs.

The metal never seemed to warm, no matter how long he lay on it. How long did *The Antiquities War* say Tawnos was in his coffin? Five years?

"You can ask him," Kaya said. Her voice was faint, sibilant in his mind. He couldn't hear her—she spoke through him, for him. In this middle stage between corporeal and insubstantial, there was increasingly less of a distinction between the two of them.

Teferi laughed, Kaya laughed. They couldn't stop themselves—the nerves, the fatigue. Kaya was his medium; she was already in his head. More accurately, *he* was in *hers*.

"Remember," Kaya whispered. "Concentrate on the sky. Find the deepest dark."

Teferi did. The Anchor's humming climbed another step.

"Time is a tapestry and you are a needle."



Piercing. Howling.

The coffin started to grow hot. Teferi's breath came faster. He couldn't hear anything but the layered tones of the Anchor rising. He heard Kaya and Saheeli shouting across the cacophony to each other, Kaya's voice echoing in his own mind.

He never got used to this part. He hated this moment, this tearing of his spark and soul from his body—

"Go."



*"Soul Partition", by Kekai Kotaki.*

...

He felt his body slip away,

and with it the cold metal

of the facsimile coffin.

...

The mission was not the problem. They had their target identified and they knew where to look for answers. They had power, they had weapons, they had knowledge, and they had allies. Crucially, they had a new Sylex.

The problem was they didn't know how to use the damn thing.

Saheeli had built an essentially perfect replica from Karn's plans and notes, but for all her brilliance she remained only an engineer. The mystery of the Sylex's activation was not mechanical—it was magical, a spell buried in history, and history was unreliable.

To wit:

The Golgothian Sylex had first been created or discovered by Feldon, a scholar of languages and ancient glaciers, some decades before the Brothers' War. As well, it had been created by Ashnod, carved from the skullcap of the qadir her master, Mishra, replaced. Also, it had been pulled from Old Phyrexia's deepest ichor well by Gix, a demon who slouched



to Dominaria out from dreams of steel and oil. Also, the Sylex had been chiseled from a giant's tooth and kept by the Kobolds of the Khers; as well it was one of Tal's hardened tears, the spell-frozen corona of a falling star, the melted heart of a mountain hammered into shape by Sardian dwarves, and so on, and so on.

The myths of that old world-ender's beginning filled reams, and there was no way to tell which one was true. Likewise, for the Sylex's end.

Karn believed his to be the real one, but histories Teferi had dug up spoke of the Sylex being destroyed by Urza, or shattered by Jared Carthalion, or consumed by a great and long dead dragon, or tossed into a lake as tribute to some icebound god.

By Teferi's reckoning there were four or five Sylexes worth following up on, and contradictory histories for all of them: t  hus, the Anchor, the needle, and the tapestry.

"So how do we find it?" Saheeli asked. She had a direct, solutions-focused mode that Teferi appreciated in a crisis.

Teferi looked out over the papers, scrolls, manuscripts, etchings, and ancient tomes spread before him. They covered the old drafting table, a layer of history encompassing thousands of years of Dominarian legend. All of them were useless, he thought, save for one.

Teferi reached out and shoved the histories aside, knocking some to the floor as he searched. He had read and discarded it early on—not for a lack of craft, but for a lack of specifics.

Saheeli said nothing. She arched an eyebrow and watched the time mage throw valuable texts into musty corners until he stood, triumphant, holding a mold-scarred manuscript.

"*The Antiquities War*," Teferi said. He slapped the papers on the table and opened them. "Here," he said, stabbing a finger on the moldering epic. "Urza's wife, Kayla bin-Kroog, wrote this epic chronicling the history of the war she herself bore witness to. There are many versions and translations, but they all end the same way: Urza activated the Sylex on Argoth and ended the war." Teferi looked up at Saheeli. "We go here—the last battle of the Brothers' War."

"Good enough." Saheeli nodded. "I'll get to work."

...

He felt her there with him

He was her needle through time,

a spirit who echoed, echoed,

...





*"The Temporal Anchor", by Kekai Kotaki.*

Echoed.

Urza, this coffin, the Sylex, the Phyrexians—threads enough for Teferi to be sure that there was some greater cosmic architecture, some logic animating this moment that even he could not hope to understand. Fate's unknowable tempo moving not just Teferi, but all of them in a grand orchestration through history. All Teferi could do was look backward through his furrowed path and hope that something in his wake would hint at what was to come.

Teferi kept this worry private. It would not be reassuring to his friends and allies to see the consummate chronomage so reduced. To know he was a captain standing blindfolded at the rudder, only a sailor who had not once been to sea.

At night he stood alone in his room near the top of old Urza's tower, staring at the worn floor, unable to sleep.

Teferi was just as lost as the rest of them.

...

The darkness was absolute,

He floated, a

Alone?

...

Teferi's head ached. With all this temporal sojourning, he hadn't slept well in weeks. Or maybe he did—maybe he had been asleep this whole time. He didn't remember.

In the coffin Teferi wore a blindfold over his eyes and a simple set of underclothes. A bandage wrapped around his midsection. Though it had been some time and Elspeth had laid on hands and treated his wound with Halo, the Phyrexian creature had wounded him deep. He felt its



ache when he breathed, though this, too, he kept to himself. Whether phyresis gnawed away at his marrow or the Phyrexians threatened the barricaded doors of this chamber, the approach of death was steady and unstoppable. Unless—

Echoes. Time. History repeating itself, with variations. Teferi did not know whether the creature that carved him open had left glistening oil in him. He did not know if Elspeth, Wrenn, Jodah, and the others would fail to hold them back now. All he could do was play his part.

Teferi managed his breathing. He didn't know when now was.

Had he died? Or was there someone else in the darkness with him?

...

Count the beats

One, two, three, four,

What was taking him so long—

...

All Teferi had learned from time travel was the easy and true joke: it was only possible to go forward, once, and only at the pace of life.

Urza cracked this axiom. Teferi had been there and knew that it cost nearly everything. Since his own brush with time, he had stayed away from violating that law. Manipulating time was casting sparks in a drought-dried ocean of grass: conflagration was all but assured. The only thing left to chance was the might of the fire that would follow.

But when the field was already burning? When the fire had already swallowed up everything?

...

for both

the needle and its thread, flashing—

Once set in motion, you can't stop it

...

Silver.

Silver could evade time's ironclad law. Urza discovered that silver could travel physically back in time, made Karn and, Teferi supposed, started this whole affair.

Physical travel was not what Teferi and the others needed or desired. Physical travel would be the same as standing in the conflagration and



dousing oneself with lamp oil. No, they didn't need to go back themselves—they only needed to see what occurred.

Saheeli had cracked the problem. Forgo the silver; if you're heading into a conflagration, go as a spark. By extracting one's spirit and casting that back, one would be unable to interact with the past while remaining able to observe—the flipside must also be true, or at least not false.

On paper, this made sense.

So had Urza's plan, Teferi reminded himself—and how did that end? Tolaria in flames, rifts torn in time, that endless lingering. Had there not been a threat so great to warrant this endeavor, Teferi would never have agreed to undertake this expedition.

Had there not been a threat so great, Urza never—

Yes, yes, Teferi thought. Of course.

...

And in the end? What

would they both say of their timelessness?

It was like falling, like dancing.

...

— 85 AR —

Teferi arrived in a dark room in a flooded city that he would later learn to be Kroog.

There, he watched a brutal man go mad and scream about ghosts and assassins. This was worrying: no one should be able to see him. None of the tests they ran indicated that anyone could see him as a spirit.

Teferi departed; anyway, this was not the moment he was looking for.

...

— 28 AR —

Teferi stood in a dark alley under a burning sky. He was back in Kroog. He recognized it immediately from the towers: during his first visit they were crumbled ruins. Now, they stood proud above a city under siege. The bells thundered above rising screams.

The dead were everywhere.

This was not the Last Battle, but Teferi lingered for a moment. A soldier, a boy in what Teferi would later learn to be a Fallaji uniform, reached out to him. He said something over and over, a plaintive word that, while Teferi told himself he did not understand, he knew he understood.

“Father,” the boy gasped. The boy died.



Teferi stood, jaw clenched. His body back in the coffin twitched, as one does when they are dreaming.

“Not yet,” he whispered.

Kaya, who saw everything Teferi saw, never spoke about this moment to anyone.

...



*“Evolving Wilds”, by Sam Burley.*

— 44 AR —

Teferi walked through a charnel valley somewhere southeast of Tomakul. This was the same war as the one he saw days prior, now decades later. Metastasized to its mechanized apex.

Long, deep trenches striated the land. If Teferi could fly above it, he would look down on a world rippling with muddy scars. Machine and human corpses were thick as crops in a farmer's field, draped over trench and wire, twisted and broken. Between them marched columns of soldiers laden with packs under rain-slicked coats. These were armies of men more dead than alive, as spectral in soul as Teferi was in body.

Once the armies passed, ghouls stalked the fields of the dead, harvesting the bodies they found useful. Teferi watched as black-clad and shuddering figures loaded crude, wheeled carts with human and machine corpses, hauling them away toward Tomakul, until one of them saw him.

Teferi departed, steeling himself. If this unremembered field had seemed to him a circle of hell, then what terrors did the Last Battle hold?

...

— 4562 AR —

Teferi, Kaya, and Saheeli sat around the open coffin, Teferi eating while Kaya and Saheeli drank coffee. It was some horrible time between night and morning. None of them slept anymore.



Outside it was quiet. Kaya told Teferi that Elspeth had been in an hour or two before he emerged. She had asked about his progress and told them that the Phyrexians were close.

"What does 'close' mean?" Saheeli had asked her.

"Bar the door when I leave," Elspeth had responded. She had been on the line with the other planeswalkers, and her voice was hoarse from shouting over the sounds of combat.

Time was running out. Success or failure, they were stuck inside until the end.

"I found it," Teferi said, breaking the silence.

"When?" Kaya asked.

"When I was coming back," Teferi said. "I saw it, like a scar. Part of the tapestry blotted out, like ink spilled on a page. Blotted time. I haven't been to that one yet."

Kaya nodded. She didn't need an explanation.

"The Anchor might not be able to take another sojourn," Saheeli said. Her voice was softest of the three of them, but it carried best in this cold and vaulted room.

"What happens if the Anchor fails while he's inside?" Kaya asked.

"I don't know," Saheeli admitted. "I would guess that he dies. His body dies, at least. His spark," she waved her hand, delicate fingers dancing toward the ceiling. "Nothing good."

"And her?" Teferi said, nodding towards Kaya. "She is my medium—she's back there with me. What would happen to her?"

"Teferi, I only built the Anchor," Saheeli said. "I'm an engineer. I know how it could fail: the Anchor's powerstone could erupt, then the temporal bridge would collapse, then coffin would overheat and implode." Saheeli sipped her coffee. "I know how machines break," she said, "not what happens to a soul when it is severed from its body."

They let Saheeli's words be the last on the topic. They finished their coffee and small foods. Wordlessly, Teferi slid back into the coffin and draped the cloth back over his eyes.

"Ready?" Kaya asked Saheeli.

"Ready," Saheeli agreed.

"Teferi?"

"Let's go," Teferi said. "I'll see you all in a little while."

Kaya closed the coffin lid. In the darkness, Teferi slipped away.

...





*Urza sat cross-legged with the bowl in his lap. The runes within the bowl spiraled toward the center. Blood from the gushing wound on his forehead dribbled into the bowl and filled the carved runes with crimson.*

In the present day, Kaya whispered her dialogue with Teferi, relaying everything that he saw back to the present day. Her voice had a deeper resonance, a layering that placed Teferi's voice under her own. Saheeli, though she was occupied with running the Anchor, could not help but listen.



*"Mishra, Engine Monstrosity", by Chris Rahn.*

"The blood from the cut on Urza's forehead is dropping into the bowl, filling the runes. He's sitting cross-legged with the bowl in his lap," Kaya muttered. She swayed, sweating, hands placed on the coffin.

*The Mishra machine had recovered from the avalanche and was now charging up the hill, its dragon head screaming. Urza looked up and saw his brother's face, half-torn from the metallic skull beneath, and wept for him.*

"His brother is close to him. It could be triggered by a kind of sympathetic resonance between the two. Maybe it takes more than one person focused, some heightened emotional state—or could it be the proximity of Phyrexian technology," Kaya said.

"What else?" Kaya asked.

"Tears. Lots of tears. Urza never cried. He's so… human, here," she replied.

*The Mishra machine had attained the hilltop now, and its serpent head loomed high above them. Mishra was grinning, the smile half-flesh and half-steel. It was the grin of a man triumphant.*

*Mishra was screaming something.*

*A flash at the base of the bowl—*

*A flash at the base of the bowl—*

*A flash at the base—*



*A flash—*

"STOP!"

…

— 4562 AR —

Teferi slipped back to the present.

He barely made it out of the coffin before he retched, coughing out a thin mix of water and salt crackers onto the cold stone floor of the chamber. He trembled, the wound at his side aching. Behind the blindfold he wore against the brightness of the real world, a kaleidoscope of color pinwheeled.

"I almost have it," he lied as Kaya helped him out of the coffin. "I think it has to do with the blood, or maybe the depth of the grooves. Saheeli," Teferi shouted. "Does your Sylex spiral? The runes?"

"Of course it does," Saheeli shouted back from the base of the anchor, where she was busy making small adjustments and repairs.

Kaya pressed a cold towel to Teferi's forehead. "Listen," she said, steadying him as he swayed. "What we're seeing back there—what your spirit is exposed to—it's brutal."

"Do we have time to rest?" Teferi asked.

"Eat," Kaya said, ignoring the question.

Teferi ate a small amount, as much as his stomach could handle. He took a sip of water, then climbed back inside the coffin. The sound of fighting outside the chamber went unremarked.

"Hurry," Kaya said. "Please. This is difficult for me as well." Her usual demeanor, her devil-may-care attitude was gone.

Kaya was right and Teferi knew it. As his medium, she may as well have been right there with him every time he cast back.

"Give me as much time as you can," Teferi said.

Kaya looked at the barricade they had piled against the chamber door, then back to Teferi. "Last one," she said. She closed the coffin lid and slammed its latches locked.

In the quiet of the stasis coffin, Teferi felt he could be anywhere. It was warm now, comfortable, and stank of his sweat. He exhaled and waited for Kaya to do her work.

Two soft taps on the lid of the coffin—her hands. A purple whorl, spreading like silent fire across the inner lid, bright through his blindfold.

His body dropped away. He was anywhere.

...



A division between real-time—that is, what Teferi thought of as the present day, which he could not see beyond—and *back then*. With the aid of Saheeli's Temporal Anchor and Kaya's extraction and mediumship, it was an easy enough task for Teferi to step between real-time and back then; the difficulty was fatigue and navigation. He could go back to any point he could remember but had to discover the moment first. The travel left him exhausted and weak.

Teferi, as best he could, set his fears aside. He tried to let the task at hand replace them. A month of meticulous searching, and he had finally found the moment he needed when it was most desperate. The Phyrexians were, quite literally, at the door.

Alone Teferi stood under a firmament his mind told him was a night sky and searched it for the dark nebula he knew to be the Brothers' War. He found it and stepped inside, his spirit crossing millennia with a thought. Inside that space was a manifold darkness, a nothingness patterned with textures Teferi had only just begun to comprehend.

He found the curious one, the stygian blot he hoped was the Last Battle, and—as a needle plunging through cloth—dove inside.

...

A black sky. A rain-lashed beach. Ticking and twitching metal ruins, still dragging themselves toward their enemies. Two titanic constructs col-

lapsed across each other over the wild-burning old growth. Behind him, oil-slick waves crashed and roared, dragging dead bodies up and down the stained sand.

Argoth. The Last Battle. Moments before the end of the world, again.

...



*"No One Left Behind", by Chris Cold.*





*The Mishra machine had attained the hilltop now, and its serpent head loomed high above them. Mishra was grinning, the smile half-flesh and half-steel. It was the grin of a man triumphant.*

*Mishra was screaming something.*

*A flash at the base of the bowl—*

Everything stopped.

That was not entirely accurate. Everything slowed. With a gesture, Teferi divided time's progression by halves down to an infinite number. Time, as much as Teferi could observe, froze.

Command over time was an awesome power. Godly. Teferi knew it to be ruinous, so he was a careful practitioner. He had thought the answer lay in observation, in taking special care with this moment to note every detail of Urza's movements, emotions, and words. There was so much he did not know, so he tried to observe and report on every single thing—even the rain, just in case that was a component of the spell.

All his care rewarded him with nothing. None of what he saw even so much as warmed the bowl of Saheeli's facsimile Sylex. He had to find some way to step beyond.

Teferi thought of a way. It was a risk. Was this not a risk? Everything could go wrong, yes, but back in his time everything was already going wrong: Karn was gone, the Phyrexians were on Dominaria again, Jaya was dead, their last redoubt was about to fall. What was the worst that could happen? Teferi thought. The end of the Multiverse?

Circumstances pushed him to be reckless. That infinite halving that protected him also distanced him; he needed to align his time with Urza's.

It was a terrible risk. Teferi weighed what he knew: Urza did not die when the Sylex detonated. No one knew how he came back or when, but Teferi knew him when he was young. He had studied under him at the Tolarian Academy. However, just because Urza lived it did not mean Teferi—even as a spirit—could withstand the Sylex's blast. That artifact was more than just a bomb: the Shard of Twelve Worlds, the Ice Age, every important event over the last four millennia—everything came after this moment. His family came after this moment. If Teferi could have taken a deep breath, he would have. A thought, as he acted: existence is not guaranteed.

Teferi stopped holding back time.

The Multiverse tore open.

Everything came after.

...





*"Urza's Sylex", by Joseph Meehan.*

**??????**

What remained of Urza sat cross-legged on a scrape of Argothian earth. The Sylex was balanced on his lap, its bowl filled with white, scouring light frozen in bloom.

Teferi stood a short distance away, a spirit in soft hues. He could see little of Urza behind the light emitting from the Sylex, but enough to make out the planeswalker's silhouette inside the detonation.

Together, the two of them were alone in an empyrean void. The ground underneath them was a small patch of Argoth, and then blank nothingness in all directions. To Teferi, it looked as if they were standing within the belly of a cloud.

Urza. How long had it been since Teferi had last seen him? How many lifetimes, how many lives? Teferi walked over to Urza and sat opposite the Sylex. He cleared his throat.

"I need to tell you some things about the future," Teferi said to Urza. "Your future, my present. It concerns everything."

Urza looked up, his face a raw, grinning skull. "What?" he said, his voice unburnt.

"They won't be good things," Teferi emphasized.

"Curious," Urza said. He looked at the Sylex, at the light creeping out from an illuminated point in the bowl's nadir, then out at the space that surrounded them. "One does not expect happy news in a formless void," he muttered. "Is this the afterlife?"

"No," Teferi said. "I hope not."

"Fine, then," Urza said. "Who are you?"

"In a moment—I need to ask for your help."



"You said you are from my future," Urza said, ignoring Teferi's insistence. "That you need my help. How do you know whether or not you talking to me will change anything?" Urza waved at the vastness of eternity. "Or worse—maybe it will change everything."

Teferi hesitated. "I'm not sure," he said. "We had to take this chance."

"'We,'" Urza said. A question, posed as a comment. "Either what you're going to tell me matters a great deal, or it doesn't matter at all."

"That seems so," Teferi muttered. The two men fell silent. They looked once more at the Sylex, that ruinous thing.

"You should know first that you are a great man now," Teferi said. "But you're nothing like what you will become." He tapped the edge of the Sylex. The solid core of the light, tense as brimming water at the bowl's lip now, wobbled. That light was doom, Teferi thought. He was staring at the end of one age and the dawn of another.

"And what is that?" Urza asked. He cradled the bowl in his lap. Most of him was burned away by the Sylex's detonation, but he did not appear to be in pain. Blackened flesh peeled back to expose scoured bone, and where there was nothing there was a brighter light—a spark, coalescing.

His spark. In this moment, Urza was becoming what he would become.

"Some would probably call you a god." Teferi thought back to his school days. "Others would call you a curse. I called you my teacher; most know you as 'Planeswalker.'"

Urza could not smile anymore—his skull had blackened and crumbled, his shoulders and ribs burned to ash. And yet his voice was strong as when he was whole.

"There's nothing I can do to change that, is there?" Urza asked. He sounded exhausted, not plaintive. Fatigued as a man gone decades without sleep.

"If I'm here now," Teferi whispered, "I don't think there's anything you or I can do to change what will happen. Time does not pass like the hand of a clock: it's already happening."

"Then what is this," Urza said, gesturing at the formless void that surrounded them. He stood, staggering up to his feet, the whole of his torso tumbling in gray clumps of ash.

"Allow me to lecture for a moment?" Teferi asked.

"Take all the time you need," Urza said, a sarcastic snarl creeping into his voice.

Teferi, still seated, leaned back, resting as one does in a soft field of grass, as if soaking in the sun. "There are many metaphors for time," Teferi began. "All of them are true, to some degree. Together they form



a mosaic of understanding." Teferi watched as Urza stepped to the edge of the ground. If he had features left, Teferi guessed he would be staring out into the void.

"There's something out there," Urza whispered. "Hurry."

"People say, 'time flows like a river,'" Teferi said. "But that only imagines time moving forward."

Despite his evident frustration, Urza was curious. He listened as Teferi spoke.

"That is neither totally wrong nor totally right. It's just limited by our perspective. Humans, I mean. We have one angle into the prism of existence: we only ever see time going one way, so to imagine time as a river isn't wrong. And since we're all a part of this," Teferi waved a hand at the void around them, "our metaphor contains some of the truth. Rivers are agents of time's passage. They exist on a scale larger than us. They also hold mysteries: If we were to walk alongside any river—the Mardun, maybe—we'd come across places where it tumbles into whorls and eddies, shoots off on little branches that go nowhere, or join other rivers, or are snipped off into their own lakes. Those lakes are places where the river stops; if time is a river, then those lakes are moments where time stops." Teferi said "I think we're in one of those right now."

After a moment's pause, Urza finally spoke. "Why?"

Teferi smiled and shook his head. “No idea. I took a risk based off what I knew to be true—I’m just as surprised to be here as you are.”

“You say in the future I become a teacher?”

“Many thousands of years from now,” Teferi said.

Urza scoffed. “My pedagogy needs work,” he said. Gruff, but not unkind. Teferi knew the Urza of his own youth in Tolaria well enough to know the old goat approved of his decision. “So, what’s next?” Urza said. “What do I need to know so I can tell you what you need to know?”

“You’re going to encounter more of them,” Teferi said. He did not need to explain; Urza understood who “them” meant. His brother, and the demon from Koilos.

“You’re going to spend your life trying to fight the Phyrexians. First for what they did to your brother, and then for what they will do to you.”

“Is that what that thing is called?” Urza muttered. “A whole race of them…” He was too insubstantial to emote, but Teferi saw light creeping in at the raw edges where Urza’s body once was, latticing through the burned void. In the empty sockets where his eyes once were, new light began to glow: one red, and one green.

Urza was being remade. Stitched together into something else.



Planeswalker.

“You lose,” Teferi said. “The Phyrexians win. You fight them for millennia, but they always win. You discover there are more worlds than one, more than even you can count. Each occupies a plane of existence, and together they are bound up in a space called the Multiverse. You travel these planes for centuries and discover there are others who can travel them as well. Eventually, you establish a school—that’s where we first meet, at this school—and you try to crack open the mysteries of time. You succeed but find you cannot go back.”

“Then how did you manage it?”

“With great difficulty,” Teferi said with a weary smile.

Skin filled in over Urza’s light-woven scaffolding, raw and young, bleeding across to fill his features like peach crushed on a white sheet. His lips re-formed in time for him to frown.

“Get to the point,” Urza said. “Despite everything, I do not stop the Phyrexians. You are here having travelled through time in a way I could not. Why?”

Teferi could hear the pain in his old instructor’s voice. Here he was, trapped at the moment of his death with a desperate man from the future who told him that his war did not end here. That his final act did not grant him any peace, but only unlocked a door holding back an even

greater war, one whose trail of ruin was unavoidable, one that would stretch across thousands of years and claim countless lives. Had he been a kinder man, Teferi would have stopped talking. He would not have told Urza the truth.

Am I as cruel as he? Teferi wondered. As necessary? Time will tell.

"The Phyrexians are back," Teferi said. "In my time they threaten the whole of the Multiverse. As we speak, my body lies in your tower, surrounded by other Planeswalkers like us. The Phyrexians are attacking; they're trying to stop us from learning how to stop them before their invasion can begin."

Urza was nearly whole. "Why not go back to when I—when we—first beat the Phyrexians?" He asked. "What happened then that is so much worse than now?"

"No," Teferi said. He thought of Zhalfir. Of Shiv. Of the Mirage War. Of time torn apart and Urza's fury. "Not then. Never."

"Then why now?"

"The Sylex," Teferi said. "In our time we have a facsimile of this one. Saheeli—a brilliant woman from a plane you would think is paradise—she recreated this very device: all we need to know how to do is activate it."

"You're going to use it against the Phyrexians?"



"Yes."

"And that will end this?"

"Yes."

Urza nodded. "Give me some room," he said, waving Teferi back. Urza approached the Sylex and stood over it. The obliterating light would soon grow to eclipse the setting sun. He sat. He gripped the edge of the bowl and lifted it back into his lap. Once more his body began to smolder away, flaking into ash—this time revealing the lattice of light underneath.

Teferi recalled what power had been like before the Mending. The body was only a vessel: the spark was greater.

"I held it like so," Urza said. He was contemplative. His voice hitched for a moment as his upper body burned away again—and yet, though the light streaming from the Sylex was overpowering, Teferi could still see Urza's silhouette within it, a brighter light somehow. A being refusing death.

"I let the blood from the cut my brother dealt me fall into it," Urza said. "I felt the weight of Terisiare on my heart," he thought for a moment. "I could hear the whole world crying out—I didn't need to read the runes here to understand what they meant." He traced a solar finger across the belly of the bowl. "There was a woman during the war—Hurkyl, of the College of Lat-Nam." Urza spoke aloud, but not to Teferi.

Teferi listened—anything Urza said could be the key.

"They said she could use magic," Urza shook his head. "I didn't believe the stories, but I was wrong. Hurkyl's 'meditation' was real: a method by which one could make themselves a conduit for the… soul of the land: love, pain, joy, fear, emotion, and memory. All of it, channeled through a single point. Through a single person, who could draw this power through them and project it into the world. This is what I called upon when I used the Sylex. I had nothing left, and when I held this in my hands, I poured everything into it. Then it all ended." Urza looked up at Teferi. "As soon as I held it, I knew what to do. That's all I can tell you."

Teferi understood. With horror, he understood. There was no unknown spell to discover, no secret mechanism by which Urza activated his Sylex. Hurkyl's meditations were well documented. The runic carvings on the Sylex had been cast and re-cast, etched in perfect replica on Saheeli's copy. It was all known and understood. They had everything they needed but the person. The trigger to detonate the Sylex was not a spell or an artifact—it was a person.

"I think our time is up," Urza said, pointing into the void above Teferi's head.

They looked up toward the empyrean distance. Cracks spidered across the infinitude, silent and seeping. Against the blank unfathomable space, numberless, dark fingers began to probe. Shadows, pressing



against this enclave. They were overstaying their welcome. Something was coming for them.

"Will I remember this?" Urza asked.

"No, I don't think you will," Teferi replied. "Our lake—it just becomes part of the river again."

"I thought as much." Urza stood. "Thousands of years of this," he whispered. "Gods, I'm not ready."



*"One with the Multiverse", by Liiga Smithkalne.*

"You are," Teferi said. "You have to be."

Urza looked at Teferi, his eyes flashing ruby and emerald facets. "I never asked," he said. "What is your n—"

The void broke.

The dark rushed in.

...

— 64 AR —

And there was silence in Terisiare.

...

— 69 AR —

What had once been a verdant coastline was now awash with debris. The flotsam of great trees and the jetsam of huge boulders had been driven miles into shore, creating a blasted region along the shore, devoid of life.

Among the wreckage was a large metal box, seven feet in length, three feet in width and height. It had weathered the destruction and came to rest among the other far-flung remains of what had been Argoth.

Urza stood alongside the box and pressed his hand against the lid.



The box's top slid along its casters, revealing the slumbering form of his former apprentice. Tawnos took a breath, then sat bolt-upright, gasping for air. His face was pale, and he was covered with dead skin that had flaked off but had nowhere to go within his confinement.

Urza waited for Tawnos to regain his composure, standing as patient as a statue. Tawnos took a deep breath, held it, then took a second one. Then he looked around at the devastation that surrounded them.

"It is over," said Urza, sitting on the edge of the box.



*"Calamity's Wake", by Slawomir Maniak.*

Tawnos gulped and looked around. “This was the safest hiding place I could think of,” he said. Urza did not reply. Tawnos said, “Your brother?”

“Dead,” said Urza. “I…” He shook his head. “The demon, the Phyrexian, killed my brother long ago. I never realized it.”

“Where are we?” asked Tawnos.

Urza looked around and sighed, deeply. “The southern coast of Yotia.”

Tawnos blinked. “It has changed.”

“The world has changed,” said Urza, “because of what we did. Because of what I did.”

Tawnos climbed out of the box, and Urza helped him. Tawnos felt weak from his incarceration and rubbed his arms and legs, both to shake off the dead skin and to restore circulation. It was cold on this shore, colder than Tawnos remembered it as a youth.

“I need one last task from you, my former student,” said Urza.

“Name it,” said Tawnos.

“I want you to go west. Find the remains of the Union, the scholars of the ivory towers. Tell them what happened here. Tell them what we did, and what we failed to do. See to it that they do not do the same. I trust you to do this.”



Tawnos looked at the older man, but it seemed to him that Urza was no longer old. His hair was blond again and his shoulders straight. But his eyes were old beyond years and pained beyond mortal hurt.

“You can always trust me,” said Tawnos. “Where are you going?”

Urza turned from his former pupil. “Away,” he said after a short while. “I am going… away.”

“It looks as if we could use your help here,” said Tawnos. Urza made a noise that Tawnos thought was a nervous laugh. “I don’t think the land could survive any more of my help. I need to… I need to go away. And think by myself. Where I will not harm others.”

Tawnos nodded, and said, “I don’t know if there is any place that far away.”

Urza shook his head and said, “There are places far beyond the land of Terisiare, far beyond world of Dominaria. When I poured my memories into the Sylex, I saw them. I see many things that I had never seen before.”

He turned back to Tawnos, and the Master Scholar saw Urza’s eyes. They were no longer human eyes, but rather two gemstones, radiating with a cascade of multicolored hues: green, white, red, black, and blue.

Mightstone and Weakstone, reunited at last, within the surviving brother.



*"Urza, Planeswalker", by Ryan Pancoast.*

The image was only for an instant; then Urza's eyes were normal again. Urza smiled. "I must go away," he repeated.

Tawnos nodded slowly, and the man with human crystalline eyes stood. "You have long been a student," said Urza. "Now go be a teacher."

As he spoke, Urza began to fade from view. Slowly the color drained from him, leaving only outlines; then they too faded. "Teach them of



our triumphs and our mistakes," said a distant voice. "And tell Kayla to remember me not..."

"... As you were, but as you tried to be," finished Tawnos, but he was speaking to empty space. Urza had passed from the world into greater worlds that only his crystalline eyes could see.

Tawnos looked around, but there was no sign of life. He struck inland, hoping to get past the worst of the devastation before he had to travel west. He recognized no familiar landmarks, and he had the feeling that he would not for a long time. Tawnos wondered how bad the devastation truly was.

And as Tawnos walked inland, he was greeted by the first flakes of snow drifting down a chill wind.



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# PHYREXIA

## ALL WILL BE ONE

**By Seanan McGuire**

# EPISODE I
# Uncontrolled Descent

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THE PLANESWALKER STRIKE TEAM
INTENDED TO DESTROY NEW PHYREXIA WITH THE SYLEX,
BUT THEIR FORCES ARE SCATTERED ACROSS THE PLANE,
WHERE EVEN THE ENVIRONMENT CAN BE DEADLY.

---

Kaito couldn't have answered if someone had asked him what he was expecting to find in New Phyrexia. The information they had going in was too scant in some places, and no one still living had ever witnessed a fully compleated plane. They had their intel and their recon and everything they could have to prepare them for the incursion, but he still didn't know what he'd been expecting—only, roughly, what he hadn't been.

He certainly hadn't been expecting a feeling like slamming into a wall of electrostatic wind—not enough to do actual damage, but enough to disorient, to distract, and inevitably, to steal consciousness away.

And now that it had happened, he certainly hadn't been expecting New Phyrexia to look like one of the nicer tourist beaches of Kamigawa. What he could see of New Phyrexia was all pristine sand without a sign



*"Monument to Perfection", by Igor Kieryluk.*

that anything more dangerous than sunbathing had ever happened here. It was pleasant. So pleasant. New Phyrexia wasn't a peril, it was a paradise, and he should just relax and let it wash over him like a wave from the welcoming sea…

The crashing of that sea rang in his ears as he closed his eyes and sank deeper into the sand. Part of him knew Phyrexia would recognize his presence soon and react the way any dangerous beast reacted to an



intruder. A small speck of unaddled coherence at the edge of his consciousness screamed at him to wake up, wake up, *snap out of it*!

Phyrexia was a danger. He wouldn't *be* here if Phyrexia wasn't a danger. Kamigawa was under threat, and he had to do whatever was within his power to protect everything he'd ever cared about. His friends, his world, his sister… he came here to save them all.

But the sand was warm and inviting, and he couldn't find it in himself to move until small, strong hands grabbed him by the shoulders and jerked him into a sitting position. They felt familiar, like hands that he should know. They also felt like an attack, and so he thrashed, trying to pull away. The small, screaming corner of his mind screamed even louder, trying to remind him that fighting back should have been his *first* thought, his *first* reaction to even a whisper of hostile action, but no: only futile thrashing seemed to suit.

One of those small, strong hands released his shoulder, and he was able to pull briefly free, ready to sink back into peace and pleasure, before it slammed into his cheek, striking him just below the eye so hard that he heard the crack as much as he felt it. He recoiled, eyes jerking open, and for the first time, he realized that what he'd taken for the sound of waves was actually the sound of metal clashing on metal, spells impacting their targets, and grunts of exertion. Someone screamed, and he knew, with-

out question, that before the blow he would have heard it as some kind of seabird flying overhead—if he'd been able to hear it at all.

"There," said the Wanderer with some satisfaction, releasing his other shoulder and shaking the impact out of her hand, knuckles reddened but otherwise unscathed. "I was wondering when you were going to join us."

"Join—?" Kaito paused, thoughts flickering back to the wall of static wind. The wall he had remembered as pleasant, even peaceful only a moment before. But it hadn't been, had it? It had been…it had been…it had been something he couldn't remember, except for the sound of screams. Some of them might even have been his own.

He grabbed instinctively for his sword, body suddenly flooded with the adrenaline that should have been there all along, and froze as he realized his equipment was gone. No sword: no small, friendly spirit emulating a tanuki drone in form and function. Phyrexia had slapped him down when he should have been untouchable and stripped him bare in the same instant. His eyes flicked back to the Wanderer, just in time to catch her momentarily disappearing, guttering out like a dying candle.

"No," he said, shaking his head fiercely. "No. You need more time. I need more time. You can't go before you tell me what I missed."

"—barrier," she said. "We didn't expect it, and it seems to have—blocked my ability to anchor myself. Can't—stay here. Losing grasp. Have to—tell



you—" A look of profound frustration crossed her face, and she turned, shouting at a point slightly beyond Kaito's right shoulder, "Nahiri! Stop—toying with that—thing!"

Kaito turned, loath as he was to take his eyes off the Wanderer when she was so close to vanishing, and beheld Nahiri, sword in hand and cheeks faintly flushed with exertion, the heat of her blood showing through the slatey tone of her skin. She was dancing—no, *fighting* with a figure that looked to have been shaped from liquid metal spliced with panels of



*"Watchful Blisterzoa", by Chris Cold.*

wiry cabling, like a fever dream of mechanical poetry escaped from the inventor's bench and turned against the world. It seemed impossible that anyone, even the lithomancer, could fight this construction and win.

Then the air flashed around her, igniting with a crash as loud as thunder, as Nahiri called the glittering metallic sand of New Phyrexia to join her dance. It rose grain by grain to swirl around her, a storm even deadlier than her hail of shaped stone blades, and crashed together on the fighting figure, overwhelming it as sand invaded exposed machinery and nasal passages alike, putting down Nahiri's opponent in the blink of an eye.

As it fell, Nahiri was there, stepping forward and driving her primary blade home, through the center of the creature. She twisted once, and the shape beneath the mounded sand was still.

"*Nahiri,*" snapped the Wanderer, voice strong enough that for a moment Kaito dared to hope she was stabilizing. He turned back to her, and his heart sank. She was still fading in and out, close to being pulled back into the Blind Eternities. It must have been taking immense power of will to stay even this long.

Nahiri trotted across the metal sands as easily as if she were walking on solid ground, pausing to bob her head to Kaito before focusing on the Wanderer. "You called?"



The Wanderer frowned . "—scrambled longer—than—need to explain—what he—missed," she said, words spaced oddly as she flickered too far out of phase to be heard.

"Right," said Nahiri. She focused on Kaito. "I don't know whether they knew we were coming or whether they're just paranoid monsters, but we slammed into some sort of planar shield when we breached New Phyrexia. We should have been fine. We pretty obviously weren't. I don't know where most of our team wound up. The three of us crashed down here. Sand got you?"

Numbly, Kaito nodded.

"Got me at first too," said Nahiri. "Luckily for me, this whole place is made of metal—not the normal kind, but close enough for my purposes, even if this stuff would rather harm us than help us. It's a passive weapon. It'll still kill you if you let it. I shook myself out of it, found the Wanderer standing over you, shifting in and out of the world. Not sure she'll be hanging on much longer."

"What was that thing you were fighting?" asked Kaito, not wanting to think about the possibility of losing the Wanderer to the Blind Eternities for even a little while.

"One of the locals," said Nahiri, shrugging. "Fast. Pretty lethal. No real challenge."

"You're not hurt?"

"Just a scratch. Nothing I can't walk off." She reached up and touched the back of her neck with her free hand, fingers coming away damp with blood—not smeared, as they would have been had she been direly injured. "My blood's still red. No oil. I'll be fine."

She held up her bloody fingers for his inspection, smiling faintly. Behind him, the Wanderer's eyes widened, and she flickered faster, apparently gathering her strength for another exclamation.

Nahiri lowered her hand. "Come on," she said. "I don't know where we are, but we need to meet the others on the Furnace Layer, and we don't want to hang around anywhere Phyrexia wants us to be. Let's get moving before this place comes up with defenses beyond a few foot soldiers and some hypnotic sand."

"I lost my equipment," said Kaito.

"Is it in the sand?"

He shook his head as he looked around.

"I don't *think* so," he said. "If my drone were here, she'd be digging her way back to me. You're the metal detector, not me. Do you feel any Kamigawa steel near us?"



"Sorry. Just Phyrexian metals," said Nahiri.

"We'll find it," Kaito said. "And we'll find the others. Do you know which way to go?"

"This way," said Nahiri, and started walking. "If we stayed on our original trajectory as we fell, the next landing zone is in this direction. If we didn't, then we're just lost in Phyrexia, and you should start praying to whatever you believe in."

"How did you orient yourself so quickly?" asked Kaito, trying to slow her down enough for him to help the Wanderer across the sand. Not that she would normally have needed any assistance, but with as uncertain as her grip on this plane was, he wanted to do anything he could to make this easier on her.

"I've had practice," Nahiri replied. "I saw explosions coming from over that way. Things got chaotic over there." She had a grim satisfaction in her tone. It was hard to tell whether she was proud of their companions for wrecking things, envious that she hadn't been given the same opportunity, or pleased that she'd been able to finish her own fight without any major difficulties. Nahiri could be confusing that way. He didn't know her well enough to tease her meaning out of everything she said yet, and wasn't sure, under the circumstances, that he was going to get the chance.

They trudged across the sand—sand that wasn't anything of the sort when Kaito looked at it more closely; what he'd been taking for a seashore was an infinite desert of particulate metal, pieces of Mirrodin ground into fine dust by Phyrexian power. The Wanderer paced beside him, flicking and silent, clearly spending all her energy on remaining in tune with the world. He glanced once again to Nahiri.

"Nothing here is what it looks like," she said, voice brusque. "You can't trust anything Phyrexian. It's all lying to you, all the time, whether it knows it or not. Keep moving."

Kaito kept moving.

The desert stretched out ahead of them, extending to the distant base of a massive, incomprehensible monument built according to some twisted parody of geometry. They pressed on into the shadow of the titanic monument, a tiny trio of attackers moving through a hostile land, and nothing else moved, and they were alone, and the oppressive weight of Phyrexia was all around them, and they were never going to be alone again.

The landscape grew more and more ordered as they pressed on, terrible in its alien symmetries. Vast constructs of gleaming metal cast their shadows across the shining ground, celebrating unthinkable victories, glistening in spots with exposed flesh that made Kaito's skin crawl. Were



they leftover structures from Mirrodin, or the sleeping forms of Phyrexian goliaths?

Some mysteries were better left unsolved. At least Mirrodin's five suns still shone, dim through the dense fog. The group rounded the terminus of a low wall that seemed to have been forged from half-melted bone mixed with silver, and stopped at the sight of a stone statue hanging suspended between two iron pillars in a tangle of steel-sheened cables.

It depicted an elf, short and muscular, and so perfectly carved that Kaito would have sworn he saw it breathe. It looked entirely out of place in the Phyrexian tangle of metal and bone.

Nahari hissed sharply. Kaito glanced at her, confused.

"That stone," she said. "That's Zendikarian hedron. Either Phyrexia has reached Zendikar, or something else is going on here."

The Wanderer pointed to the figure. Kaito followed her finger. Why would a statue be wearing *clothes*? More, why would a statue be *armed*? A bronze bracer holding a double-bladed sword was strapped to its left arm.

"He's one of ours," said Nahiri abruptly. She started to move forward.

Against his own better judgement, Kaito put a hand on her arm. She stopped.

"On Kamigawa, this would be a trap," he said.

She nodded slow understanding. "If it is, we take the bait," she said.

Kaito started looking for things he could use as projectiles. Nahiri's metal knives would have been ideal, but he wasn't sure he could wrest a single ingot away from the ancient lithomancer even if he had wanted to.

The debris under the statue would have to do. Kaito reached out telekinetically, pulling a cloud of metal slivers and shrapnel into the air around him. It was nothing compared to his blade or Himoto, his tanuki, but it was infinitely better than going into a fight unarmed.

Not that they knew this was going to be a fight. The statue might be nothing, and so far, they hadn't been attacked. Carefully, the trio moved toward the statue.

They were almost there when the cables holding it up writhed into sudden activity, like a nest of snakes waking from hibernation. Some of them unsnarled themselves completely and reared, increasing the impression of serpentine awareness. Kaito tensed, preparing to strike with his array of makeshift arrows. The Wanderer raised a hand, motioning him into stillness. He stopped, still tense but not yet striking, to watch Nahiri move forward with cautious grace.

The cables twisted to track her motion. The statue opened its eyes and started to struggle as the cables drew tighter.



"Definitely one of ours," said Nahiri. "He looks uninjured. We should be able to cut him free."

"So we attack?" Kaito looked to the Wanderer.

She nodded assent, and he unleashed the confused fury he'd been carrying since the beach in a hail of shrapnel, raining crude razors down on the nest of cables in a twisting swarm of pirouetting, swirling slashes. The cables responded, lashing out at the cloud, the clash forming a discordant symphony of cracking, exploding metals.

In the meantime, Nahiri spun into action, her own blaze of knives darting forward to continue what Kaito's makeshift armory had begun, slicing and cutting away at the cable creature with an artist's precision. The statue dipped lower and lower as the taut metallic sinews holding him were cut away, until, with a loud snapping sound, the last one broke and dumped him to the ground. The Wanderer rushed forward and knelt beside him, feeling for a pulse.

The stone man responded by swinging a mighty, if disoriented haymaker at her. His fist passed through the white-haired woman's body like she was a ghost, leaving her frowning disapprovingly.

"She's not quite here," said Kaito, following the Wanderer's footsteps to offer the stone man his hands. "Please don't hit her again."

"What—" The former statue let himself be pulled to his feet and looked frantically around, finally focusing on Nahiri, who was applying a bandage from Kaito's med pack to the back of her neck, pressing the magically adhesive edges firmly down. "What *happened*?"

The Wanderer, who had been silent since calling Nahiri from her fight, swallowed and clearly gathered her strength. "Hit a—barrier," she managed, voice flickering in volume like she was fluxing rapidly near-to-far. "Everyone—split apart. Trying—find others."

Nahiri looked over at them. "Are we going to have to do this every time we find someone?" she asked. "Because it's going to get real old if we do."

The statue laughed, looking heartened by her sniping. "We may be lost in a hostile world, but some things remain the same; heroes clash when first they meet." The stone drained from his skin, replaced by a light tan. He offered the Wanderer a polite bow. "I am Tyvar Kell, Prince of Kaldheim. I thank you for your counsel."

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. A look of frustration crossed her face.

"The Wanderer isn't stabilizing," said Kaito. "I don't know how she's managed to hold on for this long, but if we don't rest, we're going to lose her soon."



"She'll be back," said Nahiri.

"But will it matter if we don't wait for her?"

Nahiri didn't have an answer for that. She looked from Kaito to the Wanderer and repeated, "We have to keep moving."

As a group, the four of them resumed their trek through the blasted wastes of New Phyrexia. There was beauty in the grim monuments that stood in the distance, but having seen the living cables holding Tyvar,



*"Planar Disruption", by Campbell White.*

Kaito was all too aware that everything they passed was a construction of this bitter world, and not grown or nurtured by the plane's own nature. Anything could become a threat at any moment.

The Wanderer continued to flicker and did not speak again. She stayed close to Kaito, looking around them with evident worry. Something was clearly bothering her—he wished he had some way to help her, but they couldn't afford to stop long enough for him to try.

On they went, until on the horizon a small, ramshackle assemblage of tents and lean-tos appeared, small figures visible moving between them. Nahiri and Tyvar tensed. Kaito, more concerned about getting the Wanderer to a place of rest, motioned for them to be calm. The group continued moving until the figures came into clearer view: they were Mirrans. Most were human, bronze-skinned and armored in gold, with flashes of white fabric visible between the plates of their armor. Leonin also moved among them, comforting feline figures. Soft gold glinted from what little exposed skin could be seen around their armor.

All of them moved with the natural grace of the organic, rather than the strange gait of the compleated, and Kaito exhaled. Safety. Such as it could be found on this plane, it was there, ahead of them.

He turned to the Wanderer, intending to say something to boost her spirits and bolster her strength. His exhale became a sigh as he saw that



she was gone. She had been able to hold on long enough to see her childhood friend out of the initial danger, and no longer than that.

"She'll be back," said Kaito, as much to himself as to the others. "She always comes back."

"Take heart, friend," said Tyvar, clapping him on the shoulder. "We have far yet to go."



*"Melira, the Living Cure", by Miranda Meeks.*

"Yes, but…I wanted us to make it here together," said Kaito, and started walking again. Together, the three of them approached the camp.

A wiry human woman with short-cropped red hair and fair skin devoid of metal ornamentation came out to meet them, a staff topped with a gleaming light held low by her side, posing no immediate threat, but ready to become one.

"You aren't Phyrexian," she said, voice sharp. "You're the ones Koth told us were coming. I'm Melira. I'm a friend, and a healer. Are any of you hurt? Do you require aid?"

"No," said Tyvar, voice bright in the cool, still air. "We came following Karn and the Gatewatch's call, but we were lost on arrival, and you're the first friendly faces we've seen. Are there others like us here?"

"Ah," said the woman, understanding. "I'd heard rumors Elesh Norn was setting up some sort of defense barrier against people like you. Guess she got it up and running. The rest of your people should be gathering two layers down, in the Furnace, assuming they made it that far."

She began moving away from the small encampment, gesturing for the four of them to follow.

"This is the Monumental Facade," she said. "When the Phyrexians took Mirrodin, they built a shell around our world, trapping those of us who'd



survived to keep fighting underneath. We wouldn't be allowed to see the suns from our original home any longer. This is where they send their toys to fight each other to the death, but we came up to find you. You would have had a harder journey if we hadn't been here, drawing fire and trying to make sure nothing got away to report our location."

So Phyrexia didn't have surveillance everywhere? Kaito nodded, taking this as some of the first good news they'd received since arriving.

"Mirrodin—the real Mirrodin—is beneath us," Melira continued. She stopped at the center of an oddly flat patch of ground, looking at each of them in turn before finally focusing on Nahiri. "You're the lithomancer they said was coming, yeah?"

"I am," said Nahiri, knives shifting in the air around her. "Why?"

"It'll help, that's all," said Melira, and slammed the butt of her staff down on the center of the clear patch.

There was a momentary pause, long enough for Melira to look annoyed and glance over her shoulder like she was waiting for something, and then the ground dropped out from under their feet as a roughly ten foot square of what Melira called the Monumental Facade crumpled inward.

The explosive charges had been excellently set. Kaito had to admire them, even as he realized he was falling. This was a new and unsettling

development. Above them, the thin shell of the world looked like a shattered plate of black metal. Beneath them, the landscape rushed up to make their acquaintance, no more than a hundred feet below.

Nahiri scowled at a smiling Melira, who didn't look the least bit concerned, and the chunks of falling earth beneath them glowed dully hot as the lithomancer caught hold of them and slowed their descent, creating a shallow shell they could ride the rest of the way to the ground without being injured.

Melira actually laughed at that. Kaito blinked. "Why are you laughing? We could have all been killed!"

"Koth said you were powerful mages come to save the world," said Melira. "Well, the Façade's shell breaks all the time, with or without our help. If you couldn't handle a little fall, you weren't going to succeed anyway. Though this is better than I would have hoped. Once we touch down, we'll be near Lowlight—we can make for the lacuna and head into the Furnace Layer to meet the rest of the survivors."

Kaito didn't like that word. "Survivors" felt like a premonition, and with the Wanderer already gone, it wasn't something he wanted to think about. Still, he schooled his expression to neutrality. "We're very grateful for your help," he said, and glanced to Nahiri, waiting for her to say that she'd been injured when she and the Wanderer had found him in



the sand. She did nothing of the sort, keeping all her focus on guiding them to a landing.

It had only been a scratch, after all. Better not to break her concentration for a scratch when it was nothing that required healing.

Tyvar had other questions. He waved a hand, indicating the land around them. "We descend farther? Is this not the Furnace Layer?"

"No," said Melira. "The Phyrexians call this Mirrex. They can't even allow us the grace of our true name. I told you the real Mirrodin was beneath us. This is all that remains of our home."

"I see," said Tyvar, subdued.

"The main force of our assault teams will be gathered in Lowlight, ready to aid you in your efforts," said Melira. "There's no price too great for us to pay for a free Mirrodin. This was a beautiful land once. Fate allowing, it will be again."

"For Mirrodin, and the Multiverse," Kaito said, and Melira smiled at him in brief unity before moving to look over the edge of Nahiri's makeshift platform.

Mirrodin—what remained of it—was a wasteland beneath them, withered from lack of light, without even the alien beauty of the surface. If

Phyrexia had done this to break the spirit of the resistance, they had probably come closer than anyone wanted to believe.

Nahiri guided their makeshift conveyance to a stop on the surface, looking to Melira. “Is the whole place like this?” she asked.

Melira nodded. “It is. You keep going down, and there’s always some new horrible surprise waiting for you.” She hopped off the piece of shell to the ground, which was actual stone here, interspersed with more of those metallic hexes. “At least they’re predictable about it. Everything wants to kill or compleate you. No exceptions.”

“Not even you?” asked Nahiri.

“Me?” said Melira. “I’m immune. It’s why the Resistance lets me move around without a guard, and why Koth had me watching for you. Come on. Lowlight’s this way.”

She began moving briskly across the wasteland, leaving the Planeswalkers to follow her toward the low, battered shape of a Mirran camp. Once they reached the border, she led them straight through to a low wall of what looked like razored glass, gesturing to it broadly.

“We took the lacuna when Koth said you were coming,” she said. “It’ll take us down to the Furnace Layer. We would have released it soon, assuming no one was coming.”



“Then we go down,” said Nahiri.

Melira looked halfway amused. “Have any of you used one of these before?”

“No,” said Kaito.

“They’re fun,” she said. “They play games with gravity internally, so you don’t fall beyond that first jump. Starting off is always harder than continuing.” Melira strode toward the lacuna, easily stepping up the series of crates that had been stacked next to the wall, and leapt off.

The Planeswalkers followed her. Upon climbing the same crates and looking down, they saw her standing on the floor of a tunnel of some sort, dropping into the depths of Phyrexia, lit from within by a pale, sourceless illumination. She looked back over her shoulder at them.

“Well?” she asked. “Are you doing this?”

Nahiri leapt without hesitation, and Kaito jumped after her. There was a moment of sickening disorientation and then he was standing on the wall. Looking back, Tyvar was the one who looked like he was positioned in defiance of gravity, something the big man clearly realized, because he laughed and jumped into the lacuna.

“Onward, friends,” he said, and strode forward. Kaito paced him, and in short order, the pair had passed Nahiri, descending into Phyrexian soil.

Melira hung back slightly with Nahiri, glancing at the bandage on the back of the other woman's neck, but not asking—not yet.

...

Nahiri didn't feel right. She was familiar with her body and the way it was meant to come together, bones and tissues laced like stones in good soil, and right now, something was awry. The cut at the back of her neck, the small, inconsequential injury, throbbed, intruding on her awareness more than anything so minor had the right to. She hung back a little, allowing Melira to pass her, before she reached behind herself to feel the bandage she'd taken from Kaito's pack. The gauze was oddly bunched, as if something had pressed against it from below.

Peeling back the bandage, she touched the surface beneath with delicate fingers, and found no injury, only smooth skin and a short, slick protrusion that had no business growing there, as if her bones had decided to reshape themselves. She pulled her hand away with a hiss of dismay, somehow unsurprised to see that they gleamed with the same glistening oil as had tipped the spears of the Phyrexians.

She was infected.

She was already lost.





*"Thrill of Possibility", by PINDURSKI.*

She knew she should tell her companions—but how? And what good would it do any of them to know? They couldn't kill her, and if they tried, she would fight back, regardless of her condition. She couldn't leave, or she would carry the taint away from this doomed and dying plane to infect another. The Mirran was supposedly a healer, but even a healer couldn't stop this—could they? No, it was best to get them as far as she possibly could before she succumbed and became something that was easier for them to destroy.

Pressing the bandage back down, she re-covered the wound, and pressed onward.

...

The Mirran camp, small as it had been, was razed and gone when the white-haired woman in the wide-brimmed hat appeared, looking warily around, sword at the ready. Nothing moved or motioned to attack her.

"Kaito!" she cried. "Kaito, are you here?"

Nothing answered. A patch of ground had fallen inward not far away, and the Wanderer ran toward it, recognizing it for what it was. She peered down into the depths, and saw no sign of her companions; only rubble on the distant Mirran ground. They were gone.

She had returned from the Blind Eternities too late, and they were lost.

"I could have warned them," she moaned. "They have no idea what they're walking into. We were naïve to think this could be so easily achieved."

She straightened. Her time on this plane would be brief. If she was going to see them again, she would. Until that happened, all she could do was wait for her departure, and hope for their safety.

It wouldn't be enough. It had to be enough.

It was all she had.

# EPISODE II
# Unstable Foundations

THE SURVIVING PLANESWALKERS
UNITE WITH THE MIRRAN RESISTANCE
AND PREPARE FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL.

Static, and screaming, and the sensation of falling forever.

Elspeth had awakened alone on the soil of New Phyrexia, gripped by fear of the worst. They had clearly fallen into a trap. Was she the only one spared, once more a prisoner of Phyrexia?

The thought barely had time to form before a cluster of Phyrexians charged over the crest of the hill. Elspeth grabbed her sword and rose to meet the threat, grateful they hadn't arrived while she was unconscious. She could so easily have been overwhelmed; the greatest warrior falls when caught off-guard.

Or when outnumbered. There were six of them to one of her, and they knew the terrain where she didn't. She still cut three of them down before she found herself losing ground. The first Phyrexian had nicked her

arm, and the fear returned, hotter this time, telling her the battle might not go in her favor.

That was when a purple-tinged blade thrust through a Phyrexian heart, telling her she wasn't the only survivor, and more, she wasn't fighting alone.

Kaya's presence quickly turned the tide in their favor, allowing them to emerge unscathed, Elspeth near-frantically she checking Kaya for injuries. She was immune, but Kaya wasn't, and there was no such thing as too much care on Phyrexia.



*"Mirrex", by Adam Burn.*



Exposure was a death sentence. They all knew it. The risks had been one of the first things explained when the Phyrexian threat was discovered. There were ways to escape that inevitability, but they were rare, costly, or both. Halo *might* be one, but their supply was limited, and they had yet to test in the field. It was too much to hope that Melira would still be alive and able to help them.

Still, knowing a thing and accepting it were very different, and Elspeth couldn't be sure Kaya had fully internalized the danger she was in.

"You okay?" said Kaya. Elspeth gave her a short nod.

With the fight done, the pair had moved onward to the Mirran camp, where a troll named Thrun had been able to break a hole in the shell of the world and drop a rope ladder they could use to reach the surface of old Mirrodin. From there, they had continued toward the white lacuna, the original opening to Mirrodin's core, that would now take them to the Furnace Layer. No other members of their company had appeared to join them.

Elspeth only hoped, wild and somewhat unfounded, that when they reached the bottom, they would find the others.

Her gloom was evident as they walked. Kaya would have been willfully in denial to miss it. "It can't be too much farther from here, sunshine," she said, using the variable gravity of the lacuna to walk along the wall.

"We both landed okay. A little bumpy, but we're fine. We'll find the others. You'll see."

"At least you didn't wake up with Phyrexian forces coming to separate you from your head."

"No, just with this little guy shaking me." Kaya caressed the head of the small, tanuki-shaped robot that rode on her shoulder. It wasn't Mirran or Phyrexian in origin; Elspeth would have guessed Kamigawan. It must have belonged to someone from one of the other strike teams. It was lucky it had landed with Kaya. Much longer on its own, and Phyrexia would have already found a way inside.

Elspeth, who was familiar with the lacunae from her time on Mirrodin during the war, walked more sedately, trying to stay ahead of her own thoughts, which turned down bleaker paths than she preferred. She'd known coming back here would be hard, but seeing what it had become, how much had been lost—it was brutal.

New Phyrexia seemed like a world built for regretting. Maybe it ached less for Kaya, who had never seen Mirrodin, who knew they walked through a graveyard, but not the volume of the blood that tainted every surface. It was easier, in some ways, to walk the ashes of a battle that had never been yours.



The lacuna stretched on and on, longer than would have been possible without the nurturing magic that wept from its walls, sustaining and reinforcing it. When they reached the bottom, they may as well have reached the top; they had followed the line of the anchoring magic far enough that gravity reversed itself again, forcing them to grab the rungs protruding from the walls and climb the last ten or so feet to the opening.

Pulling herself onto the lacuna's rim, Elspeth held tight as she beheld the Furnace Layer. Below her, she could hear Kaya's near-effortless ascent, and she shifted slightly to the side. "Hold on when you get out here," she called down. "The last of the magic will escort us to the ground as soon as we let go."

"Escort us to the—oh. Of course we're popping out of the ceiling," grumbled Kaya. "Did the Mirrans not believe in dependable gravity?"

"This is dependable gravity. It's just dependable in a different way."

Kaya boosted herself up next to Elspeth, looked around, and let out a long, low whistle. It wasn't an unreasonable reaction.

True to its name, the Furnace Layer *burned*. Magma teemed all around them was  and the air was swelteringly hot. Shelves of pyroclastic rock served as solid ground, and somehow the thermoclines of the burning pools didn't make it unbearable, merely uncomfortable. Life could, impossibly, survive here.

Below them, on one of the largest pyroclastic shelves, a haphazard Mirran structure jutted from the landscape. An array of tents and make-shift pavilions surrounded its edges, soot-dark and constructed to blend into the earth around them, nothing too large for a single person to tear down in the blink of an eye. People moved between them, dwindled by distance and reduced to broad strokes of physicality.

Kaya glanced to Elspeth.

"Mirran?"

"Phyrexians don't build tents."

"Think our missing folks will be down there?"

"If they're not, I think this is already over," replied Elspeth, and—heart in her throat and somehow hammering in her chest at the same time—she let go.

The lacuna's magic caught her before she could fall more than a few feet, and carried her to the ground as lightly as a mother's hand, Kaya floating beside her and laughing under her breath.

By the time their feet touched the surface, a crowd had begun to gather. The people who had emerged to meet them gleamed gold with metallic embellishments, but lacked the slick perfection of true Phyrexians: this was the force they had come seeking.





*"Resistance Reunited", by Aurore Folny.*

"Elspeth!" shouted a voice from the crowd, deep, rough and rumbling—a voice like a mountain, unexpected and familiar. Elspeth stiffened before delight overwhelmed her and she broke into the broadest grin she had ever worn, spinning around and launching herself toward the speaker.

"Koth!" she cried. "Koth, I thought you were dead!"

The larger Planeswalker caught her around the waist and swung her around, both laughing, bright with a levity that seemed to have little

place in this burning terrain, in this bleakest of times. He was an imposing, dark-skinned man whose body was plated with stony armor, and the contrast between him and the slighter—though not much shorter—Elspeth was marked.

Kaya looked around, her own demeanor shifting toward relaxation when she spotted a face in the crowd. “Tyvar,” she said, smiling as she walked over to him. “Should have known you’d find your way here before us.”

He laughed. “And I should have known there was no sense in worrying about you! Skies above, you’d be someone else entirely if you didn’t fall into danger at the slightest opportunity.”

“Woke up alone with somebody else’s equipment on the ground around me, and sunshine there,” Kaya hooked a thumb toward Elspeth, who was still laughing and hugging Koth, “just a little ways away. Both of us got hit, hard, crossing over. Did you—?”

“I fear we all did,” said Tyvar, face falling. “Not everyone has managed to find their way to us. Jace was the last to come before you, and he arrived alone, having made his own path over the surface.”

“Jace…?”

“Is behind you,” said Jace’s familiar, measured voice.



Kaya huffed a breath. “You just wanted to see if I would jump,” she accused mildly, turning to face him.

The slender telepath shrugged. “You never do, so it seems pointless to try,” he said, and smiled, just a little. “Hello, Kaya. I was worried we had lost you.”

“Couldn’t you have, you know.” She tapped her temple. “You set up the mindlink before we left. You should have just been able to give me a jingle.”

The faint smile that had been forming fled Jace’s face. “The barrier broke that link, along with so many other things. I haven’t been able to reach any of the other teams. Those you see here are all that we’ve managed to recover of the strike force.”

Kaya frowned. “Vraska? Nissa? The Wanderer? Lukka?”

“Vraska wasn’t with us when we woke,” he said. “Nissa was, but even as we gathered ourselves and prepared for our journey, a trap shunted her away—as if she had somehow been forced to planeswalk again.”

“We think our group may have encountered something similar,” said Nahiri, stepping out of the crowd with Kaito close behind. Jace looked at her coolly, but made no comment.

Kaya’s frown deepened. It was no secret that there was no love lost between Jace and Nahiri. She had been counting on those who knew them

better to be the barrier between them, and had no real interest in being tapped for the job. “How do you mean?” she asked.

“Hey!” Kaito interjected, before anyone could answer. “Those are mine! Pompon!”

“These?” Kaya touched the blade she had tied to her hip with a length of rope, even as the little bot on her shoulder leapt over to Kaito’s and clung, chittering happily. “They were near me when I woke up. They’re yours?”

“Can’t you tell? They’re not Phyrexian,” said Kaito, extending his hand. He looked exhausted. They all did, to one degree or another.

“Now that you mention it, yeah. Too fancy for me anyway,” said Kaya, untying the blade and slapping the hilt into Kaito’s palm. He visibly relaxed, flashing her a grateful smile before he turned his attention to the little robot on his shoulder, murmuring a quiet greeting. It chittered back, obviously home.

Looking much more relaxed, Kaito turned back to Kaya. “No clue about Lukka. The Wanderer was with us when we arrived,” he said. “Her spark is always a little… unpredictable, but she can normally keep it under a semblance of control. This time, she flickered with departing for a long while before she departed for the Blind Eternities.”



“You might have been able to shift yourself into phase with her and tell us what she was trying to say before she vanished,” said Nahiri. Kaya had never tried to use her magic in that specific manner, but nodded anyway. “It might have been possible. Did Nissa look like she was hurt by whatever happened?”

“No,” said Jace, with audible misery. “She was simply gone. The Phyrexians were more prepared for our assault than we had hoped they would be.”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” said Nahiri brusquely. “That elf’s a hard weed to pull. We need to figure out what the plan looks like with this many of us gone.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, Kaya returned her attention to Jace, lifting an eyebrow. “Well?”“Well,” he said. “The plan hasn’t changed. The plan can’t change. We’re down half our number, but we knew the odds would be against us. If we don’t get the Sylex to the base of their World Tree before it connects through the Blind Eternities, all the planes will share Mirrodin’s fate.”

Tyvar scowled. “You mean their corrupt mockery of a World Tree,” he said sharply.

Jace only shrugged.

“Elesh Norn calls it her Realmbreaker.” Melira stepped out of the crowd, the name causing Tyvar’s scowl to deepen.

Kaya repressed a shudder as she glanced at the blasted, blackened landscape around them. She had seen enough death, dealt enough death, to have thought there was nothing left that could truly horrify her. This, though…this was so much worse than anything she could have imagined. And this wasn't everything. So much of Phyrexia was still beneath them, its horrors yet to be revealed, its dangers yet to be faced.

"You still have the Sylex," she said, half statement and half question. "Karn's plan can be carried out."



*"The Filigree Sylex", by Leanna Crossan.*



"Yes," said Jace. "We can still win."

"Karn?" Elspeth came pushing her way through the others, Koth close behind her. "Has there been any news?"

"Still lost," said Jace. "I…" He paused for a moment, then shook his head. "There's been no sign of either him or Ajani since we arrived here."

"That's likely for the best," said Elspeth, face schooled to something as close to neutrality as she could manage. "Both know far too much about the Sylex. Ajani destroyed the last one."

"This 'Sylex' is the thing you're going to use to take out Elesh Norn's Realmbreaker, right?" asked Melira.

"Yes," said Jace, with remarkable calm. "Planted among the roots of her World Tree—"

"So-called," grumbled Tyvar.

Jace shot him a look. "—it will destroy the Tree before it has an opportunity to connect this plane to the rest of the Multiverse. The Phyrexian curse will stay contained until it can be eliminated."

"How contained can it possibly be when it begins to infiltrate other worlds already?" asked Kaito. "Kamigawa is not a cost of war."

"Neither is Mirrodin," said Melira. "We still fight for the world we had, even if we'll never be able to restore what it once was. What does this Sylex do to Mirrodin?"

"Melira, we've discussed this," said Koth.

"Yes, you and I have discussed this, and you love Mirrodin enough to care what happens to our home. I want someone who doesn't love our home to look me in the eye and say we'll survive." She looked at Jace. "My people have already made it through the end of the world. Your world doesn't matter so much more than ours that I'm going to help you sacrifice what little we have left."

Jace nodded slowly. "Based on my calculations, the explosion will be immense enough to destroy Realmbreaker, and presumably take out the entire Seedcore in the process, but unless the Phyrexians have destabilized the plane far beyond what the information we have indicates, that should be the whole of the damage."

Melira nodded. "How much do you know about what they've done to our geography?"

"We know the world is layered, sphere inside of sphere, and we landed two layers higher than we meant to."



"You're not wrong," said Melira. She picked up a chunk of metallic rock from the ground, looking to Nahiri. "Hey, lithomancer, how good's your control?"

"Better than anyone else here," said Nahiri.

"Then help me out. Can you make me a little ball, about half the size of my closed fist?" She held up her free hand, fingers balled, in illustration.

"Toss it this way."

Melira lobbed the rock at Nahiri. Halfway along its arc, it froze and broke into pieces, one of them smoothing to form the requested sphere. It moved away from the rest of the debris, beginning to rotate. Melira looked pleased.

"This is the Seedcore," she said. "This is where we have to get you if you want to set off this Sylex of yours."

"All right," said Jace.

Melira looked back to Nahiri. "Can you put a round shell around that sphere you made?"

"Ask for something hard," said Nahiri. A bit of debris flattened out and wrapped around the ball, forming another, larger sphere. It continued rotating.



*"Phyrexian Atlas", by Illustranesia.*



"The Mycosynth Gardens," said Melira. "That's how they took us in the first place. They seeded the center of our world with fungus that pumped Phyrexian contamination into the air, and we breathed it in without knowing. Most of us were lost before we knew there was a fight."

"Coward's tactics," said Tyvar.

"Another layer, please," said Melira,and a third sphere formed. "The Fair Basilica. That's Elesh Norn's stronghold. We're hoping Urabrask's rebellion will keep her distracted while we're passing through her territory. If not, there's no way we make it through to the Seedcore without her seeing us."

"More?" asked Nahiri.

"Please," said Melira. "Four this time, and leave a channel between each?"

Four more shells formed, each glowing hot for a moment before cooling and darkening to its original color. Kaya looked at Nahiri. She still looked utterly serene, like this demonstration of tightly controlled power was nothing to her. It was almost unnerving. Kaya had known Nahiri was one of the oldest Planeswalkers around, if not *the* oldest, but there was knowing and there was seeing.

"That outermost sphere, that's the Furnace Layer. That's where we are now. We're not safe here, but we're safer than we'll be almost anywhere

else, and we've managed to connect a tunnel *without* freefall in the middle, which took some doing. Mirrans died to get you a shortcut. Respect that."

Melira paused, turning her face away. Her silence stretched on long enough that Koth stepped in to fill the gap. "Beneath us is the Hunter Maze, and then the Surgical Bay. We'll bypass both to land in the Dross Pits, directly above the Fair Basilica." He glanced to Elspeth. "The Dross Pits include what you used to know as the Mephidross. We'll have to watch our step there, but we should be able to make it to our next descent point without too much trouble."

Elspeth nodded. "This is…this is a nightmare," she said. "How have you survived?"

"Two more layers above us—you've seen those," said Melira. "What you may not have realized is that the layer overhead, the one we call Mirrex, is all that remains of our original world. They gutted it to build their own."

"As to our survival, it's a close thing," said Koth. "Food is in short supply. Drinkable water, even moreso. The elves are all but gone. I haven't seen an uncompleated vedalken in years. We fight the battles we can, we save the people we can, and we never stop moving for long. Mirrodin was—is—a world of steel. Mirrodin's people reflect that. As long as one of us is breathing, we'll keep fighting back."



Elspeth nodded again, more slowly this time. "I'm sorry I left you for so long."

"Don't be," he said. "Knowing I saved you, even if I couldn't save so many—it helped."

"So our world matters," said Melira, and gestured toward the rotating sphere as Nahiri added two more layers to signify Mirrex and the Monumental Facade. "Our fight matters. Your fight matters too, or we wouldn't be helping you—no other plane should see this fate."

"Agreed," said Tyvar, sounding subdued.

"Agreed," echoed Kaito.

One by one, the other Planeswalkers chimed in their understanding, and the nearby Mirrans did the same.

Melira looked at Jace, eyes hard. "So now that you know what our internal geography looks like, are you still sure we're going to survive what you're planning to do?"

Jace hesitated for a long moment before he sighed and said, "No. No, I'm not. When Urza used the first Sylex, it broke things we didn't know could be broken. But we don't have any time to spare coming up with a new plan. We shouldn't even wait for the others."

"I don't know about you, but I'm not into the idea of giving Elesh Norn time to finish her plan. We have to take out that tree before it connects through the Blind Eternities, or the shockwave could be unthinkable. We could lose a lot more than Mirrodin," said Kaya.

Nahiri looked to Jace. "These people have no idea what they're helping us to do," she said, voice low.

Melira turned to him. "What does she think you're not telling us?"

Jace grimaced, looked away before responding. "We're setting off a bomb in the center of the world. The shockwave *should* travel along the tree and destroy it without harming Mirrodin, but it's not like we can test it. Our assumptions about the stability of Mirrodin couldn't take into account the sheer amount of restructuring you've shown us." He indicated Nahiri's sphere, still rotating despite her departure. She hadn't gone far.

"So this could still destroy us."

"If I say yes, will you refuse to help?"

"If you'd said no, I would have refused to help," said Melira. "Koth's a geomancer, not a lithomancer—he says there's a difference, I wouldn't know—and the land speaks to him where the stone lingers. He told me there was a chance this could destabilize our world. It's worth the risk to save the rest of the Multiverse, as long as you don't lie about it."



Kaya nodded. This was a graveyard of ash and steel, and it deserved to be respected while they used it to achieve their goals. What they were here to do might destroy Mirrodin forever, and it was hard to see that as a bad thing, if there was a chance it would also eliminate the Phyrexian threat to the Multiverse. There would be a shockwave when the Sylex was detonated, that much was unquestionable. But as long as the World Tree had yet to connect through the Blind Eternities, the shock would have nowhere else to go. It might rip this plane apart. "Then we move," said Jace. "The Mirran forces have agreed to contribute their spare gear if anyone needs additional weapons, or armor. Phyrexian oil doesn't need to break the skin to infect."

Koth moved forward. "Our gear has been treated with a substance we call hexgold. It's rare and precious, but it offers some small measure of protection from phyresis, and it increases the strength of a weapon against the compleated. More is available to treat the equipment you brought with you."

"This is something new," said Elspeth. "Where does it come from?"

"A final gift from Mirrodin," said Koth. "We make the journey upward to Mirrex, and we scavenge plates of remaining glimmervoid. Treating the plates with blinkmoth serum refines the metal into hexgold, and lets us use it to protect ourselves."

"Is there any way I could obtain a piece of this 'glimmervoid'?" asked Tyvar.

"Yes," said one of the Mirrans, who had been watching silently until this point. "Come with me." He motioned for Tyvar to follow him into the crowd. The man did so. After a beat to consider, Koth and Kaito did the same.

"We can't linger here much longer," said Melira. "We survive in the Furnace Layer at Urabrask's pleasure, and he doesn't like it when we get too comfortable."

Kaya frowned, looking to Jace. He inclined his head to Melira. "Of course," he said. Shifting his attention to Kaya, he said, "Urabrask is the Praetor of the Quiet Furnace. He doesn't grant them shelter so much as allow them to take what they can find, and thus prevent their extinction. The chaos he creates may be the key to our success."

"Then we owe our thanks to a Phyrexian," said Kaya, lip curling. "That's a hard one to swallow."

Melira sighed. "This is an age of horrors, and everything is hard to swallow," she said. "The tunnel has been cleared out for our use, or as close to cleared as it can be—things change here, moment to moment, and what seems safe can turn in the blinking of an eye. It's good Mirran construction, and it will see us down to the Dross Pits." She indicated the rotating sphere.



"And if the tunnel's compromised?" asked Kaya.

Melira sighed. "We'd have to fight our way to the Dross Pits, and we'd never make it alive. Your plan would fail. Your Multiverse would fall. We trust the tunnel."

"I didn't say we shouldn't," said Kaya. "I just like to understand the details of a plan."

"Right; so do I," said Melira, mollified. "We descend to the Dross Pits, break into Elesh Norn's palace while her forces are elsewhere, and access the Seedcore, destroying the tree before it connects."

"Simple," said Kaya. "What could possibly go wrong?"

"Only everything," said Jace grimly, and Melira laughed.

"I'm going to check on the rest of you," she said, plucking Nahiri's rotating model of Mirrodin from the air and tucking it under her arm as she walked away, leaving Kaya and Jace alone.

Not far away, Kaito knelt, his tanuki by his side, and ran a sliver of hexgold along the edge of his blade, watching as it left gleaming specks behind. "It seems odd to hone a weapon on something that might change the steel," he said.

Tyvar shrugged, turning a hex of metal that shone like impossibly tarnished mercury between his fingers. “This glimmervoid is like nothing I’ve ever encountered before,” he said. He looked to the Mirran who had led them to the scant armory. “And it repels their ‘glistening oil’?”

“It won’t save you,” said the Mirran, passing Tyvar a shield. “Infection can still take root, and you can still be lost. But it will make your strikes sharper, and may buy you time.”

“Time is all we need,” said Tyvar.



*“Hexgold Halberd”, by Heonhwa Cho.*



Kaito smiled, shaking his head. “If the metallurgy course can wait, we need to finish preparing,” he said, breaking his sword into its individual throwing stars and meticulously running the hexgold whetstone along each edge.

Melira stalked by, pausing to snag a small pouch of powdered hexgold as she passed.

“Is there a way to treat my drone?” asked Kaito.

Tyvar focused his attention on the other man. It was a valid question, and he wanted to know the answer, if not as much as Kaito did.

“The little construct can be powdered, if its gears can take the strain,” said the Mirran.

Kaito laughed. “Dust is always a danger. She’ll take the strain.”

Not far away, Koth and Elspeth sat on rough crates, watching each other as they would a sibling believed lost—and in a way, that was precisely what they were. Born of different planes, bearers of different sparks, but siblings forged in terrible battle. A battle that was not yet done.

“I thought I was never going to see you again,” said Elspeth.

"I thought the same of you," said Koth. "You are a miracle walking. But I wish you hadn't come. You fought free of this. You were to be spared. You could have gone seeking for your home, could have escaped, and instead—"

"I'm a warrior," said Elspeth. "I may not want to be, but I have to be a hero, to honor those who never got the chance. I have to try, Koth, and if I knew the danger and refused to come, I'd be no better than a coward."

"I understand," he said. "It's an honor to know that I'll have another chance to go down fighting beside you."

Elspeth managed a wan smile. "I just wish we'd had more time."

"That's what it means to be yourself, and not forced to become a part of the Phyrexian mass," said Koth. He rose, offering her his hand. "Come. It's almost time to go."

She blinked up at him as she took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. "You're coming with us?"

"I am," Koth confirmed. "I have a demolition team standing by to do what needs to be done if your Sylex fails. You know I don't like problems with only one solution. This tree will not take root in other soil."

Elspeth smiled. "I'm glad to have you along. Both selfishly, and because I think our chances of success just got much, much better."



"You always had too much faith in me," said Koth lightly, and they walked, together, back to where the others prepared themselves for war.

Nahiri, who had been waiting for them to move, slipped out of the shadows and into the relative privacy of the spot where they had chosen to have their conversation. She hissed as she peeled the bandage away from her neck, revealing the blunt, hardened spike growing there.

"I thought so," said Melira, behind her.

Nahiri jumped, whirling half around to face the slim Mirran. Melira didn't flinch.

"There's an air to people who're still holding on to the hope that they're wrong, and you had it," she said. "Here." She reached into her pocket and tossed the pouch of hexgold to Nahiri, who caught it and looked at it blankly for a moment before frowning at Melira.

"You're not too far gone," said Melira. "I could treat you now, and you'd stand an excellent chance of recovery. But you'd lose days if we did that, maybe more."

"We don't have that kind of time," said Nahiri.

"That's what I thought you'd say," said Melira. "You're early enough in the process that we can wait. You have time before you're too far gone

for me to pull back. Try the hexgold. If that doesn't work, you can tell me what you want to do."

The spike on Nahiri's neck was covered by a layer of what felt like ordinary skin; calling a razored bit of shale into her hand, she sliced through that thin veil of tissue, cutting until she hit something hard that she hoped—truly hoped—was bone. Reaching up with her other hand, she sprinkled the powdered hexgold over the wound she had created. The skin spasmed, and she felt a bubble form, expelling the hexgold from her body. With a convulsive itch, the skin knit back together; she touched it experimentally, and found no seam, no blood, only a faint gritty film of hexgold.

Face betraying nothing, Nahiri plastered the bandage back down and looked to Melira. "It didn't work," she said. "You say you can fix me?"

"I can," said Melira. "But if I do…it's a hard healing for the body to go through. You'll be out of commission for days."

"You can't hurry it along?"

"That is hurrying it along. Your body's already fighting as hard as it can. That helps me. But we'll lose you for a while. Can we win this without you?"

Nahiri was silent, but her tightly-drawn expression was answer enough. No. No, they couldn't. She was the strongest mage they had, and more,



she was in a world all but designed to respond to her magic. They needed her. "After everything I've done for the Multiverse, this shouldn't be how it ends," she said. "It's not right."

"And this won't be how it ends," said Melira. She tossed the sphere she had been carrying to Nahiri. It stopped halfway between them, resuming its slow rotation. "You're strong. You're fighting this. Now you'll fight harder for Mirrodin, and for your own future."

Nahiri nodded slowly. "And if I'm already infected, I can show these Phyrexian assholes how much damage a daughter of Zendikar can do before they knock me down."

"Good," said Melira. "So we fight now, and I heal you later."

Nahiri nodded and moved to Melira's side. Together, the two of them walked back to join the others. It was time to move along.

Jace and Kaya were preparing to depart, standing on a little hand-pumped cart that would carry them into the tunnel system that connected to the Dross Pits. Both looked grimly determined to face what lay ahead, faces set, no sign of nerves.

Nahiri envied them a bit of that confidence. Her own was flagging.

Then Jace nodded, and the cart operators began to pump. They moved away, down into the dark.

The others stepped onto carts of their own. Tyvar with Kaito, Nahiri with Melira and a group of Mirrans. Koth and his demolitions team filled a cart by themselves, until only Elspeth remained to go into the dark. She paused, looking at the encampment around her. It was so transitory, so temporary, and yet enduring. This was what remained of the resistance. This was where Mirrodin took back its destiny, and rose again, damaged but free, or was added to the books of the dead forever.

They had to win. They had to. Not just for the Multiverse; for the Mirrans who died to get them this far, and for the Mirrans yet to come, who deserved so much better than this broken world.

More determined than ever, Elspeth stepped onto the final cart, nodded to the elves operating the pump, and made her own descent into the shadows of New Phyrexia.

# EPISODE III
# Inconceivable Losses

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BETRAYAL AWAITS AT THE CENTER OF SHEOLDRED'S ARENA.
TO KEEP THE PLAN AND THE SYLEX MOVING FORWARD,
A PLANESWALKER MUST PAY THE ULTIMATE PRICE.

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The tunnel plunged downward, arrowing for the heart of New Phyrexia. The enclosing walls whipped by too fast to focus on, concealing the unspeakable horrors and horrific wonders of the transformed world.

Elspeth clung to the cart, aware that a single bump could leave her tumbling and alone in the depths of this hostile, breathtaking darkness.

For the first time, she wished she were riding with the other Planeswalkers, instead of the Mirrans.Someone who could have provided her with a distraction. Instead, there was only the descent and the dark, and the elves at the controls, holding on as tightly as she was.

There had been a little time for conversation between their departure and the beginning of what she couldn't help thinking of as a plummet, the two operators eager to share what they knew of their gutted world



*"Blackcleave Cliffs", by Yeong-Hao Han.*

with the person they had been told might be a potential savior. Oh, how she wanted to earn that title! They were as unfamiliar to Elspeth as she was to them. She was ashamed to admit to herself that she was grateful for that unfamiliarity. It was easier for people to see you as a hero if they had never seen you fail.

She had already failed Mirrodin once, and this broken place was her punishment and payment for that mistake. She couldn't see the Multiverse suffer the same fate. She would die preventing it, if that was what she had to do.



*"We're bypassing the Hunter Maze and the Surgical Bay,"* they had said. *"Be grateful for that. We're sparing you things you should never have to see."*

*"The Hunter Maze…?"*

*"You might remember it as the Tangle. Vorinclex transported the worst of it beneath the surface during the great transformation, using it as the seed of his new empire."* The one who replied had looked almost wistful. He had probably been born in the Tangle; he probably remembered it as free and vital and beautiful, and thought it could be that way again.

Their plummet had begun shortly thereafter, and the operators had become too busy to continue their explanation of the landscape she wouldn't have to see. Elspeth shut her eyes against the rushing wind—there was nothing beyond the faint metallic glow of the cart's central steering apparatus, anyway; the darkness of New Phyrexia was all-encompassing, without even the gravitational magic of the lacuna to gentle their descent—and hung on for dear life.

Then, bit by bit, they began leveling off. She cracked her eyes open, and almost immediately wished she hadn't.

The sky, such as it was, was a sea of leprous clouds that roiled and shifted endlessly, somehow giving the appearance of rotting from the inside out even while hanging in the air. Pools of glowing green liquid she recognized as necrogen dominated the landscape, casting an eerie green light. Even before Phyrexia, it had been deadly, capable of transmuting the unwary into the undead. Now it could do that or induce phyresis, and she wanted no part of either option.

Elspeth looked at her hand and winced. The necrogen light made her look sallow, like she was rotting. The pallid complexions of her companions mirrored her own. As far as this place was concerned, they were already dead.

"Everything rots here," said one of the operators. He kept his attention focused on steering their cart to the end of the line, where the rest were already waiting. "If you stay too long, breathing in the fumes, you'll rot too."

"It's not as bad as the Surgical Bay," said the other, her own face drawn with worry. "There, if you get too close to one of the fountains, you can find phyresis starting just because you breathed the spray. The fumes kill you before they turn you."

Elspeth unlocked her fingers from the bar she'd been gripping and stood, shaking the cramp out of her hands. "That's horrible," she said.



"That's New Phyrexia," said the first operator. "It changes what it can, kills what it can't, and converts the ruins into its own image."

They were still slowing, now almost at a stop. The other carts weren't far ahead, their passengers in various stages of gathering their gear and disembarking. Koth's demolition team was testing the blackened ground between pools of necrogen with long metal poles, scouting out the closest thing they were going to find to a safe path through this nightmare.

"We have a tunnel not far from here that should take us straight to the Fair Basilica," said Koth, voice grave but not grim.

If he hadn't lost all hope by this point, Elspeth suspected he never would.

"You make it sound so easy," said Nahiri, hopping down from her cart, heels thumping against the ground. It seemed impossible that she should manage to avoid the necrogen, but she spoke the language of metal and stone; the sphere was probably telling her all its secrets even now. No point in worrying about Nahiri, who was moving toward Koth without hesitation. "But it's not going to be, is it?"

"No," said Koth. "If we take the most direct route, we might be able to avoid the majority of Thrissik's forces. If we can't avoid them, they'll be trying to take you alive if they can. He's building cairns to bring about his Destroyer, and the strongest mages are the best building materials."

Nahiri lifted an eyebrow. Kaya, who had solved the problem of avoiding the necrogen by phasing her lower legs into purple translucency, snorted. "Yeah, yeah, we're always the best targets."

"At least the chaos should give us some cover." Greeted with blank looks from the Planeswalkers, Koth smiled a quick and terrible smile. "Seven thanes rule the Dross Pits, but they've never been united. Four have thrown in their lot with Urabrask. Roxith, Geth, Vraan, and Sheoldred are lending their forces to the rebellion against Norn's Phyrexia. The remaining three are likely to be distracted, grabbing for territory, watching for betrayal. We have a better shot at our goal. But we have to move now."

"If this is when we can move without being seen, that means we're out of here," said Kaito, and stepped down from the cart. Tyvar was close behind him, spinning his piece of glimmervoid between his fingers like a coin as he grinned at Kaya.

"My friend is fond of being overlooked," he said. "An admirable, if incomprehensible, desire."

Elspeth shrugged off her pack as she moved to join the group. They were what remained of the strike team: they were the only hope the Multiverse had of being spared from the Phyrexian apocalypse. They had to win.

"Here," she said, opening the bag and removing a string of glass Halo bottles, individual doses tied together with a leather band, their corks



pushed firmly down. "This will protect us from the necrogen in the air for a little while."

She passed the bottles around, waiting until everyone had one before uncapping her own and downing its contents. As always, the taste was effervescent and clean, citrus-bright and sweet without being cloying. She wiped her mouth and looked around to see the others doing the same.

Jace swallowed the last of his Halo and breathed in sharply, the bottle slipping from his fingers before he collapsed backward onto the cart behind him. The Mirrans around him exclaimed in dismay as Kaya raced over to crouch beside him, feeling for his pulse.

After a moment, she looked up, eyes wild. "His pulse is going haywire," she said. "Elspeth, what did you do?"

"Nothing—unless the necrogen was stopping something else from happening." Elspeth moved quickly to Kaya's side. Jace was starting to twitch, not quite thrashing, but clearly not in control of his motions. "Let me see him."

Melira was close on her heels, but stopped when she saw Jace. "This isn't phyresis," she said. "I don't know what this is."

"The Halo can't hurt people," said Elspeth frantically. She reached for Jace, then froze, wincing. "He's in pain. So much pain. It's burning him

alive. I would have noticed if he'd been in pain like this while we were higher up. This is new. This started when he collapsed…"

"We have to get out of here," said one of the cart operators, looking to Koth. "We didn't come prepared to linger in the Dross Pits longer than it took to make a drop-off. I'm sorry. Even with the lady's magic juice, we should get out of here."

"And we should do the same," said Koth. "Whether we send your friend back up with the others or carry him, we have to move."

"I can carry him," said Tyvar. "We need him for the plan to work."

"But he's not the only one who knows how to operate the Sylex." Nahiri glanced at Kaya. "She's trained as well. Both of them can do it."

"I'm the backup," said Kaya. "I only take point if he's incapacitated."

"This looks pretty incapacitated to me," said Nahiri.

Jace gasped and sat up, bluish-white light crackling in the air around him as the motion knocked Kaya to the side. He twisted wildly, staring at nothing, before he shoved himself to his feet and leapt from the cart, seemingly determined to take off across the blackened landscape.



Tyvar caught him by the arm before he could step into a pool of necrogen, jerking him to a stop. "You gave us a fright, friend," he said. "What happened?"

Jace turned to stare at him, not seeming to fully see him. "The Halo cleared my head, and I…she's in pain," he said. "She's calling me to go to her. I have to help her. I have to help her right now! You have to let me go!"

Tyvar frowned, not releasing Jace. "She? Who is 'she'?"

"Vraska," said Jace, the name sounding like it was being dragged out of him, like there was nothing else he could have said, like it was the last thing in the world he wanted to say. "She made it down here, and she's alone and she's scared. I would—I would hear her distress anywhere."

The cart operators moved back to the controls, glancing to Koth for permission to depart. He nodded, and they began working the pumps, simple machines driving them up into the darkness, out of the green necrogen glow. Jace tried again to pull away from Tyvar.

"You have to let me go," he said. "I have to go to her. She needs me, and she's not going to make it if we don't help her."

"We have a mission—" Koth began.

Jace's head snapped around, eyes seeming to focus for the first time. "Vraska needs me,"he snarled, then took a deep breath, calming himself.

"You can go on without me. I'll help her, and we'll catch up to you together. Please."

"A force divided is no force at all," said Tyvar.

Jace looked at him, wide-eyed, like he couldn't believe his attempt at logic hadn't worked. He wrenched himself away from Tyvar, harder this time, and actually broke free. He began stalking across the blackened waste, not looking back.

"This is rash," muttered Koth.

"He loves her," said Elspeth. "He can't hear anything else."

"We can't let him go," said Nahiri. Kaya and Kaito blinked at her. She shook her head. "He has the Sylex. If we lose that, we lose everything. We may as well not have come. We could have stayed home, worried about our own planes, and let the remains of Mirrodin burn." The group set out after Jace, abandoning their safe route through the Dross Pits. The plan, while not yet forgotten, was crumbling in their hands, and would fall apart completely if they didn't find a way to get it back on track soon.

They followed Jace's lead, a clustered group of Planeswalkers and Mirrans.

"This a terrible idea," muttered Kaito. "I have plenty of terrible ideas, but they don't usually get everybody around me dead. But Jace has *special* bad ideas, I guess."



Still, he walked with the others, and not one of them looked back.

At first, it seemed they had the blasted, necrogen-blotched landscape to themselves. Then warring figures began to appear, shells of blackened metal barely containing raw red sinew and exposed bone, limbs jutting from every surface of their bodies, weapons like rough-hewn cleavers designed for splitting powerful exoskeletons. Some were small, scaled to match the Planeswalkers, while others towered over them, massive colossi of metal and viscera.

The majority of them echoed the Dross Pits, shells black and blistered from their caustic environment, while others glowed red-hot, superheated metallic forms cutting through their opponents as they fought onward. Urabrask's rebellion was well underway.

The Phyrexian forces made Elspeth's stomach turn. She recognized the echoes of shapes she had fought beside in the war for Mirrodin, the arms of a viridian elf, the powerful chest of a loxodon.Other aspects of their forms were entirely new, making them all the more unsettling. Every time she thought she knew what I was looking at, she would spot something else that turned it strange and unfamiliar. It hurt to look too closely. For the moment, the Phyrexians seemed consumed by their battle with each other, their heavy feet churning at the metallic landscape and sloshing through the necrogen pools. It wasn't until one of the fights tumbled past

at only a short remove that Elspeth realized what was happening. Her eyes widened, head snapping around to focus on Jace.

"You're shielding us from them," she said.

"When they look at us, they see nothing at all," he said. "It's not a shield. It's a full change to their environment." The strain was evident in his voice. "This is the fastest way to get to Vraska. She's so afraid, and she's all alone."

A vast, terrible structure loomed out of the rotting clouds of fog, as blackened and decayed as everything around it, sheltered by the terrible "wings" of a ribcage too large to have ever belonged to any living thing. Kaya made a small sound of disgust. Koth made a larger sound of dismay. Kaito glanced to them, eyebrows raised.

"Sheoldred's Coliseum," said Koth. "She makes them fight there, for her amusement."

"'Them'?" asked Kaito blankly.

"Phyrexians. Champions or those who have displeased her, it doesn't matter, they go in, and most don't come out again. Sometimes she takes our people there, when they're captured alive and deemed unworthy of the 'gifts' of Phyrexia." Koth shook his head, looking more revolted by



the instant. "No one exits the Coliseum alive and unchanged. I escaped. Mostly. Part of me will fight there until I die."

"Vraska," said Jace, and broke again into a run, Nahiri and Kaya close behind—Nahiri following the Sylex, Kaya following Nahiri.

"If his illusions go with him, the forces of New Phyrexia will see us soon," said Tyvar. He sounded nervous for once. In unspoken agreement, he and the others ran after Jace.The Coliseum gates were unbarred, so narrow the group was forced to enter single file. Jace was first through, Nahiri and Kaya close behind.

The others didn't even make it inside before they heard Nahiri swearing, and the telltale sound of metal ripping itself out of the ground as the lithomancer prepared for war. They exchanged a glance and hurried their steps, unlimbering their weapons as they moved.

Kaito grabbed Elspeth's arm before she could enter. "We can't do this," he said. "Jace is our friend, but this is foolishness. We have to recover the Sylex and keep moving."

Elspeth looked at him as levelly as she could manage. "What's the value of fighting at all, if we can't even make the stand to save our own?" she asked.

Looking chagrined, he let go.

Elspeth turned back to the entrance and stepped into Sheoldred's Coliseum.

The interior was a vast, gutted-out bowl surrounded by high ranks of backless seating, so steep that there was little doubt that eager spectators could tumble from the heights if they weren't careful. A pitted black-metal floor stretched through the center of the bowl, a pool of bubbling necrogen visible at its center and around the edges. It was a pit of horrors.

And in the bowl, bleeding profusely from a dozen terrible wounds, stood Vraska. The gorgon had one hand clasped against her midsection,



*"Vraska's Fall", by Dibujante Nocturno.*



blood trickling between her fingers as she held some essential piece of herself inside. The serpentine tendrils atop her head hung limp, and a ring of Phyrexians closed in on her, stepping over the petrified bodies of their fellows.

Those weren't the only bodies on the ground: fully a dozen Mirrans had been slaughtered before things reached this point. Elspeth couldn't help thinking, as she looked at them, that at least they had died without being compleated; it had been clean and quick.

Jace was heading straight for Vraska, trusting his illusions to protect him. The Phyrexians still didn't see him, but that wouldn't last forever. Passing like ghosts on a battlefield was one thing. Stepping between a predator and their prey was something else altogether. Kaito raised his sword as Elspeth drew hers. Tyvar pulled the hex of black metal from his belt and spun it between his fingers, skin rippling into a new composition as he borrowed its innate nature for himself.

Koth sighed, shoulders slumping. "So we're doing this," he said, before shouting grimly, "*For Mirrodin*!" He charged, stony armor turning white-hot as he activated it. He grabbed a pike dropped by one of the fallen as he ran, the heat spreading along the weapon's metal shaft, until he held a superheated rod.

The others were only a beat behind. Nahiri's blades spun a whirling song of death in the air around her, cutting down two of the remaining Phyrexians before they could finish turning. Kaya moved to advance, and Nahiri whirled on her, eyes blazing.

"No," she snapped. "If that fool wants to get himself killed, we're depending on you. Without one of you, we're finished. You stay back."

Kaya had never been afraid of Nahiri before. She looked her in the eyes, and felt her skin crawl, sudden dread washing over her. She stepped back, and watched as the others engaged the Phyrexians.

The Phyrexians turned away from Vraska, distracted by the Planeswalkers, though still not seeing Jace, who continued his single-minded race for the gorgon. Kaito raised his sword to block a blow from one of the armored creatures, Himoto beeping warning, and staggered from the force of the impact. Tyvar was suddenly there, shoving himself between Kaito and the next swing of the creature's sword, grunting as it slammed into his own metal-plated back.

It barely even dented the surface. His grin was wild as he swung his weapon at the beast. Behind him, Kaito cocked his head. The sheet of glistening Phyrexian oil the blow had left on Tyvar's transformed skin peeled off and rolled into a ball, floating in the air above Tyvar's head.



Koth battered the Phyrexians with his superheated fists, aiming for the breaks in their armor, the joints and open places, sidestepping their weapons. One of the Phyrexians—a terrible thing that looked like a metallic lobster constructed by welding a dozen or more smaller humanoid corpses into a single shape—roared and tried to stab him with a vicious semi-crustacean claw. Koth caught it right before it could jam the tip into his armor, straining to hold it away from himself.

A strike of Elspeth's sword sundered the claw, radiant golden light shining from the blow. Koth grinned at her as she continued to swing, decapitating the beast. Then he turned and flung the claw into the next combatant in the line, driving the barb through its throat. The fighter blinked once, looking almost comically surprised, and then collapsed, lifeless and limp.

The ball of oil Kaito had created suddenly accelerated, splashing into the eyes of the nearest Phyrexian. The big figure staggered backward, momentarily blinded, and that was all the opening Tyvar needed to strike it down. He kicked the body as it fell, turning back to Kaito.

"Well aimed!"

"I cheat," said Kaito, with a shrug.

Through it all, Nahiri moved forward in a cloud of whirling metal, a terrible dealer of endless destruction. The remaining Phyrexians never

stood a chance against her, much less against the strength of the gathered Planeswalkers. The last of them fell as her knives returned to neutral in the air around her, and as Jace finally reached Vraska, who took a step backward, away from him, her free hand raised to ward him off.

He stopped, staring at her with shocked eyes that still glowed faintly blue from the effort of keeping himself hidden from Phyrexia. "Vraska?" he said, not bothering to keep the hurt out of his voice. "Vraska, we have Elspeth with us. We have Halo. We have Melira. She can cure phyresis. We can patch your wounds. It's not as bad as you think it is…"

"No," said Vraska, normally steady voice hollowed out and gutted. "No, Jace, no. I'm so sorry I called you here. I didn't mean to. We were linked, and you—you shouldn't have heard that."

Jace blinked, taking a step toward her. "What? No. Calling me was the right thing to do, and you're safe now, you're safe, we saved you—"

"No!" All Vraska's missing strength returned for a single, forceful syllable. She staggered, sagged, looked at him, somehow smaller than she should have been, somehow…reduced. "You didn't save me, Jace. You can't. You were too late. It's inside me. Phyrexia is a poison even I can't fight off. It's too late."

Jace stared at her, openly horrified. Melira bit her lip.



"I can feel it from here," she said, quietly. "The fact that she's still this much herself…she must have a will that could move mountains. If she weren't so badly wounded, maybe, but as it stands…"

Nahiri stepped forward, knives following. "We can give you a clean exit," she said, voice devoid of all feeling. "We can let you die as yourself."

"I will kill you if you touch her," Jace snarled, taking his eyes off Vraska long enough to shoot a glare at Nahiri.

Nahiri stopped, looking at him dispassionately. Jace turned back to Vraska.

"Please," he said. "We can at least *try*. We can…we have to do *something*."

"You have to run," said Vraska. "All of you. Run now, while there's a chance this works out the way we meant it to. We knew there might be losses. We knew there *would* be losses. Run. Run, Jace Beleren, and don't look back. Please. I love you. Don't let me loving you be the thing that destroys you. Go. Save the Multiverse, and live. That would make me happy."

"I won't leave you," said Jace.

"The rest of us will," said Kaito. "Jace, you can stay with Vraska if that's what you want to do. You're allowed to make your own choices. But you can't do it with the Sylex."

Nahiri snapped her fingers. Her knives darted forward, slicing through the straps of Jace's pack before he had a chance to react, and Kaya snatched it before it could hit the ground, clutching it to her chest as she backed off again.

"You're just giving up on her?" Jace looked hopelessly from face to face, people he'd known and fought beside for years, people he barely knew at all. "Elspeth, you came here to be a beacon of hope—"

"For everyone," said Elspeth. "Phyrexia doesn't let people go."

"Jace, please," said Vraska. "It's over for me. Let me have this." She paused, a faint smile tracing her lips. "I never expected to die anything but alone."

"You're *not* dying alone," snapped Jace, turning back to her. "You're not dying."

"But I am," said Vraska.

Neither of them seemed to notice as the other Planeswalkers fled the Coliseum, leaving them behind, Kaya holding the Sylex tight. They were lost in their own world.

Then Jace stepped closer, and this time, Vraska didn't retreat, not even as he reached for her bloodied hands and took them in his own.

"Close your eyes," he said.



Vraska obliged.

The group forced themselves through the tight passage single file, emerging into the blackened, rotting landscape outside the Coliseum, leaving Vraska and Jace behind.

They stepped straight into the middle of a war.

The fight inside the Coliseum had been anything but quiet. They had killed and screamed and shouted for each other without consideration



*"Urabrask's Forge", by Lie Setiawan.*

for the fact that they might be overheard. With Jace still inside, there was nothing concealing them from the combatants on the field, most of whom were no longer scattered, but had come together outside the Coliseum. They had arranged themselves in ranks ranging from multi-legged, human-sized creatures to hulking constructs of sinew and bone.

The Planeswalkers and Mirrans stared. They had exhausted so much of their strength on the fight to save Vraska. Patches of skin were starting to show through Tyvar's metal shell, and the knives around Nahiri swirled a little more slowly.

They couldn't go back without backing themselves into a dead end. They couldn't press forward without clearing the field.

Elspeth reached for Koth's hand, squeezing his fingers, trying to take comfort in the fact that they had done everything they could. They might fail here, they might fall here, but they had tried.

"For Mirrodin?" she asked, resigned to the fight.

The big man nodded. "For *Mirrodin*!" he roared, and they surged forward, a wave destined to break upon the rocks, fighting to the last.

"You can open your eyes now," said Jace.

Vraska blinked as she turned to look around. The Coliseum was gone, replaced by a sundrenched Ravnican avenue, the sky above them perfect



and cloudless as it so rarely was. She glanced back to Jace, startled, and blinked again. All signs of battle were gone, along with all signs of battle readiness. Instead, he was dressed for an afternoon stroll, hair almost tamed into behaving itself, and offering her his hand.

"I may not be able to save you from Phyrexia, but I can spend one more day with you first," he said. "Let me give you this."

"Jace," she said, voice cracking into a laugh as he took her hand and pulled her close to him, and everything was wonderful, and nothing was wrong.

She could almost pretend she believed in this illusion, it was so all-consuming. They wandered the streets of Ravnica, visiting guild halls and great museums, and she let her head rest on his shoulder, lost in his dream of the future they could have had together, had the Multiverse been just a little kinder.

She gripped his hand tight in this version of her perfect world—*their* perfect world. "Thank you," she whispered. "It's wonderful."

"I love you," he said.

Vraska grimaced. "It's time for you to go. Otherwise, I fear that when Phyrexia reaches my mind, I'll harm you. Please. For what we could have been, do this for me."

"No. I won't leave you. I can save your mind, in here, at least. We can stay together, in a place Phyrexia can't touch—" The sky above them began to darken."Oh, Jace," she said, voice becoming a sigh as she reached his name. "Don't feel bad. You always need to be the hero who finds the answer, but sometimes there isn't one. If you'd just been a little bit faster…"

If Elspeth and Kaya had made it down from the surface sooner—if he hadn't chosen to wait for them—if he hadn't allowed Nahiri to bait him into an argument in the Mirran camp.—

If.

"It's not too late," he said.

"But it is." She touched the side of his face. "It's in you, too. You're already lost."

"What?"

"Here in the Dross Pits, the oil that spreads the infection hangs in the air above the necrogen pools. You should have run, my brave, foolish boy." She shook her head. "You're as doomed as I am."

"I took Halo before we reached you. I have time. We have time."

Jace sighed, moving closer. Vraska leaned in to meet him, and their lips met, one last kiss shared in the shadow of the end.



He tasted the lies on her lips as something stabbed the palm of his right hand, burning like ice, and the illusion he had so carefully constructed shattered around them, leaving them back under the blasted Phyrexian sky. Jace tried to jerk away. Vraska held him fast, their hands still joined, and smiled as sweet as anything.

"For the glory of Phyrexia," she purred.

She had grown a long, curving tail like a scorpion's, barbed at the end. That was what had struck him, delivering a hearty dose of glistening oil.



*"Phyrexian Arena", by Martina Fačková.*

She laughed, eyes flashing as she unleashed her gaze upon him for the first time. Jace raised his burning arm to cover his face, turned, and ran, fleeing from the Phyrexian who knew him better than anyone.

Her laughter followed him as he ran straight into Tyvar's metal side. The elf was retreating through the entrance, the others with him, fleeing a closing onslaught of Phyrexian forces.

Vraska was still laughing. They were going to die here. All of them.

Nahiri hissed through her teeth as she swung her sword at a hulking brute. "We're done!" she shouted. The bandage on her neck had come loose at some point in the fight, flapping with her movements. She reached back and ripped it free, revealing an odd, bony growth over her spine. She didn't seem to care who saw as she spun back to face the others.

"There's no winning here," she said. "The mission only goes forward if we move on. So you're moving on. Hold on to something."

Her magic rose like a burning tide as she reached deep enough to set the air dancing in a heat-haze of visible convection. Nahiri's power seemed inexhaustible, relentless. One by one, the knives she had painstakingly called from the substance of the layer dropped, inert, to the ground, as the sword in her hand blazed brighter. The Coliseum around her began to warp and crack, unable to resist her inexorable call.



The bony growth on her spine was spreading, as if ripping this much power out of Phyrexia itself was hastening some terrible transformation. Her skin began to fissure, revealing deep veins of burning red where blood should have been.

She met Jace's eyes across the broken battlefield, her own eyes now black from side to side, like extinguished coals. "Don't let this be for nothing," she said. "Finish the job."



*"Nahiri's Sacrifice", by Andrey Kuzinskiy.*

She swung her sword, and in that moment, she was a figure out of legend; in that moment, she could have cleaved the world. And then, with a vast and terrible shattering, she did precisely that, and everything fell into darkness.

Dust clogged the air, blackened with necrogen and bright with impossible radiance. Bit by bit, it cleared away.

Elspeth sat up, hacking, and pushed a large piece of debris off her torso before scrambling onto hands and knees, looking frantically around for the others. The impact of her body with the porcelain ground had smashed her pack, and she had to fight the urge to weep at the sight of her precious remaining Halo seeping into the ground and dissipating into rainbow mist.

Not that it had done them much good so far. They were losing. They were going to die here—if they were lucky. If they were unlucky, they were going to become terrible new tools in Phyrexia's arsenal, and carry destruction across the planes.

No. No, she couldn't think that way. She pushed herself to her feet, looking around, and was relieved to see Koth picking himself out of the rubble. He looked up, jaw hanging slightly open. "That majestic *fool*," he breathed.

"What?" asked Elspeth.



He pointed. "Look."

She looked up. There was a vast hole in the silvered sky, dark and jagged, like someone had smashed their way through.

"She dropped the whole Coliseum into the Fair Basilica," he said. "Incredible."

The others were picking their way out of the rubble, Tyvar helping Kaito to his feet, Kaya assisting Jace. Elspeth was relieved to see that the pack containing the Sylex had fared better than her own; it was still apparently intact.

Nahiri was nowhere to be seen.

Above them, Phyrexians began pouring from the hole, almost immediately joining in battle against one another. They didn't fall, but clung to the silver surface of the sky, ignoring gravity in favor of carnage. More Phyrexians boiled up the walls, these ones shelled in shining silver and white, marking them as denizens of the Fair Basilica.

Elspeth turned her head and gasped. The others followed her gaze. There, bright against the artificial horizon, was the gleaming, wide-winged form of Atraxa, fighting against the blackened invaders to her master's domain.

"We must move," said Koth. "This battle will keep Elesh Norn's forces distracted for a time, but not forever."

"And I don't have forever," said Jace. He held up his arm, blistered and burnt from Vraska's venom, skin splitting in fissures to reveal tissue gleaming with a slick brightness that had nothing to do with blood. "The Halo in my system will slow it, but not stop it."

"Melira," said Elspeth.

The petite Mirran shook her head. "He'd be incapacitated, and we'd never get him back to the surface," she said. "I can't do it here."

Jace looked entirely unsurprised. "Kaya, give me back the Sylex. I'm not going to survive this as it stands, I may as well be the one to trigger the blast."

"If you think that's a sales pitch, you've lost your damn mind," said Kaya, clutching the pack protectively.

"We can argue while we walk," said Koth. "We're close to the Altar. Your lithomancer friend has driven us to our goal, and we shouldn't let her sacrifice be in vain."

"I can't believe I'm living in a world where Nahiri saved me," said Jace. He glanced at his arm, mouth twisting. "But then again, guess I won't have to."

They began to move, picking their way across the rubble-strewn path toward the towering shape of Norn's altar.



Jace continued whispering to Kaya, trying to convince her to hand him the bag, until finally, with a disgusted expression, she shoved it into his arms and stalked ahead, body flashing purple as she phased through the largest chunks of rubble. Jace let the bag rest against his hip, looking neither pleased nor displeased; the loss of Vraska and his own future in the same blow seemed to have broken something inside him, and the despair in his eyes was a blow to Elspeth's heart. She couldn't look at him for long.

They had lost two of their number—three if she already included Jace on that list—and all the Halo. They were trapped in the heart of New Phyrexia, with no clear way home.

How much did they really have left to lose?

Under the burning sky of the Fair Basilica and the corrupted light of Atraxa, they continued on.

# EPISODE IV
# Impossible Odds

DESPITE GRIEVOUS LOSSES,
THE STRIKE TEAM REACHES THE HEART OF NEW PHYREXIA.

Elspeth picked up her pace to match Koth's, both moving as quickly as the debris-strewn platform allowed. Nahiri's sacrifice had moved them closer to their goal. It had also slowed them—save for Kaya—considerably, since tripping on the rubble would mean a long fall into the depths of the layer.

The hole in the pristine sky above them was still visible, a jagged wound in the porcelain perfection of this place, boiling with every color of Phyrexian. They hurried through a war, and while no one could have called them untouched by its horrors, for the moment, they were too small to attract attention.

Elspeth shot a venomous glance at the warriors overhead. Just you wait, she thought, as fiercely as she could. *You'll regret what you've done to us.*



*"The Fair Basilica", by Marc Simonetti.*

They wouldn't. She knew that. Even if everything went perfectly from here, even if they plucked an impossible victory from this chaos, Phyrexia wouldn't regret destroying Mirrodin. They weren't made for regretting things. Phyrexia moved for the greater good and glory of Phyrexia, and in the end, that was all that mattered. All would be One, or nothing would exist at all.

The high bridge where they'd landed seemed too delicate to have withstood the impact of such a massive piece of Sheoldred's Coliseum. Even if



the bridge would normally have been sturdy enough, the nature of their arrival should have lent them even more weight, the magnitude of Nahiri's sacrifice sending them plummeting into the fathomless white depths. Glancing over the edge, Elspeth could see farther into the layer below than seemed entirely possible. A lattice of alabaster platforms spanned the spaces all around them, connected by long bridges of crimson sinew.

After the tarnished necrogen wastes of the Dross Pits, this place reminded Elspeth of blood splashed across the white sands of Theros, sullying what should have been pristine. Koth, Melira, and the goblin engineers were born Mirrans. The Planeswalkers were strangers here, but this was *Mirrodin*, This was *their* world, not Phyrexia's, no matter how much the glistening oil transformed it. They should never have looked out of place in their own homeland.

Clusters of buildings rose from platforms in the latticework like organic sculptures, blending the sleek curve of machined metal with the organic roughness of bone and sinew. Everything was red against white, a whole world made over in Elesh Norn's image, like some terrible dream.

For all that the bridges were clearly designed to provide easy passage to multitudes of Phyrexians, they were empty save for the Planeswalkers themselves. The battle raging above them was too far away for even the echoes to drift down to them; they might as well have been alone. A faint

song filled the air instead, as if the very structures sang to them, a Phyrexian hymn of horrors.

"Nahiri made a huge sacrifice, for us," said Koth. "We have to keep moving to honor the ending she chose."

"She was infected," said Elspeth. "I saw the changes in her, right before the end. There's no way she hadn't realized it was happening. But she never said anything."

"She told me," said Melira, moving through the group to pace them. "She asked me if I could help her when we were back at the Furnace."

"Could you have?" asked Elspeth.

"I could," said Melira, and took a deep breath. "I could have helped her, but reversing the process of phyresis is like pulling a bramble from fertile soil. It throws down a hundred roots. When you dig out one, you find a hundred more. Repairing her body from the damage already done would have left her incapacitated for days. She would have had to stay behind."

"She would have seen that as wasting time we didn't have," said Elspeth.

They had managed to catch up to Kaya while they were speaking. Kaya looked at them, listening, before she asked, "Could you do that sort of healing for Jace?"



"If he was willing to let me," said Melira.

Kaya looked back to where Jace walked along, reserved, the Sylex bouncing in the satchel at his hip. The wound on his arm had turned: wire and bright metal shone through the burn. What flesh remained was raw and wet, blackening as it transmuted to fibrous cable.

"I don't think he's going to let us do that," she said, voice going soft.

*"Then you know me better than you think you do,"* said Jace's voice in her head. Melira, who had less experience with telepathy than most of the others, looked surprised. *"Really, did you think I wouldn't be paying attention to you debating my future? I'm not risking us all to save my own life, not when we've already lost Vraska. That's more weight than I'm willing to carry."*

"Glad to see you're still with us, Jace," said Kaya.

*"For now,"* Jace grimly replied. His mental voice fell silent again, all his energy going to moving onward.

"We honor Nahiri's story, and the ending she wrote for it, by finishing this in victory," said Tyvar, who had been walking close behind with Kaito. "A grand sacrifice demands a grand recounting."

"I just hope she's dead," said Kaito.

Elspeth turned to look at him, stunned. "Explain that," she said.

The lanky Planeswalker shrugged, the tanuki on his shoulder bobbing with the motion. "You have to admit, she's probably the most powerful of us."

"Yes," said Elspeth, slowly.

"She's been traveling for so long I doubt any one of us could take her down," he continued. "Maybe not any two of us. But one on one, that kind of raw power? I'd go down, and so would you. I don't want to face her on the other side of a battlefield. She chose to make sure we could keep moving even when it meant splitting herself off from the one person who might be able to save her. I hope she made that sacrifice all the way, and doesn't get caught in the middle and turn against the people she was trying to protect."

"At times it's better to grieve a companion than it is to risk fighting against them," said Tyvar, sounding subdued for once.

It was an unsettling thought, and one Elspeth didn't want to dwell on, even as she knew that it was unavoidable. They hadn't found a body among the debris. Though Nahiri sacrificed herself for them, she might still come back in a changed form, transformed into an inexhaustible enemy.

"Well, that's awful," said Kaya. "Thank you for that."



"This doesn't seem like a good place for pretty illusions." Kaito shrugged. "When we don't see things as they really are, we just wind up getting hurt."

"Uh, what in the hells is *that*?" asked Kaya, stopping dead in the middle of the pathway and staring, open-mouthed, at a stationary colossus looming up from far below them.

Its head was an inverted teardrop of the white metal, split in the center by a single empty red socket, as if something even larger had come along and plucked out its eye. The form of its body was hunched and elongated, making it all but impossible to draw comparisons between it and any more ordinary body form. It was neither insectile nor reptilian, not humanoid or built along any other predictable plan. All of it was cast in red and white, making it an almost perfect match to the landscape. Before Kaya drew her attention to it, Elspeth had taken it for another monumental building.

"Elesh Norn doesn't like to give up what she thinks belongs to her," said Koth darkly. "She has her favorites—the ones who serve her best, or fight her the most fiercely—ossified. Turned to bone and added to her Fair Basilica." He pointed to the statue. "We should still be careful. I've seen structures like this become animated and kill Mirrans who got too close."

So this could be a statue, or it could be a Phyrexian that was going to strike as soon as they moved closer. Its position put it alongside the bridge, a looming threat. Elspeth grimaced, gripping the hilt of her sword.

"Can we move to a safer bridge?" asked Kaito.

"Not if we want to reach Elesh Norn's Altar," said Koth. "From there, we can access the Mycosynth Gardens. That's where we get access to the Seedcore, and that's where she's planted her Realmbreaker. That's where we have to go."

"I still fail to understand how she could have planted even a mockery of a World Tree," said Tyvar. The scope of the Fair Basilica stole some of the presence from his normally resonant voice, making him sound reduced.

They were all reduced here. They were lessened in the presence of Phyrexia..

Tyvar continued: "The World Tree grows within the Cosmos itself, linking the Realms of Kaldheim. It exists both inside and outside of reality. Even if someone could somehow steal a seed, it should have split this plane in two when it sprouted. The fact that it hasn't is a miracle and a horror."

"We had never seen such a thing before," said Koth. "Most still haven't. Melira is the only spy we have who's made it to the Tree and back again."



"Only because they can't infect me," said Melira. "Everyone who'd gone into the Gardens with me and survived long enough to make it out again succumbed before we could make it home. Norn's tree is planted below in the Seedcore, where she imprisoned Karn. It's a terrible thing, that tree. Tyvar is right—to look at it, you'd think it would split the world in two. Its roots drive deep, and its branches reach so high they penetrate into the Mycosynth Gardens." She frowned. "At some point looking at them is like looking at something underwater. They branches are all funny and distorted, and they're not quite right."

"Omenpaths," said Tyvar. "Somehow, she's generating Omenpaths on the branches of a tree that has no right to be." He scowled, first at nothing in particular, then at the motionless giant looming nearby. "We have to end it."

"That's why we're here," said Kaya. She looked to Koth. "Can we keep going?"

"If it's going to attack, it's going to attack," he said. "Elesh Norn's Altar isn't far." He pointed to a building larger than the others, more ornate, stretching toward the sky like a citadel of gleaming white and brutal red, organic and mechanical at once. It was beautiful in its own severe, austere way. It was a monument to a unified Phyrexia.

It hurt Elspeth's eyes if she looked at it for too long. Tightening her grip on her sword, she nodded. "We keep going."

They resumed their walk. They were more together now than they'd been when they started along the bridge. Kaya still kept herself on the other side of the group from Jace, but whatever he'd said to make her give him the Sylex, she was no longer outright glowering at him.

The goliath didn't move. They passed under its empty gaze without complication, and moved toward the cluster of buildings at the end of the bridge. Kaya remained at the head of their group, phasing through the debris in her path rather than detouring around it, little flecks of purple energy marking her wake.

Koth, Elspeth, and the Mirrans came next, Kaito only a foot or so behind, walking between them and Tyvar, while Jace brought up the rear with the Sylex. Tyvar kept glancing back at him, finally saying, "Hurry along, friend Jace. We wouldn't want to lose you now."

"No, I suppose we wouldn't," said Jace, a ribbon of black humor in his tone. "Can't save the Multiverse without me."

The doors of the Altar gaped open before them, the terrible maw of an impossible and all-consuming beast. It looked as if it had been frozen between life and death, both stationary architecture and petrified corpse. Looking at it made the flesh on Elspeth's arms crawl. But they kept going, alert and braced for trouble, into the empty foyer.



"I feel very much as if we're walking into a trap right now," said Tyvar, voice hushed less out of respect for the space than out of a very realistic desire not to attract attention. Frozen Phyrexians studded the walls: Elesh Norn's most beloved subjects.

"That's because we probably are," said Kaya. "First we get scattered across the surface, then we find Vraska alive and able to hold on just long enough to scream for Jace? With Ajani on their side, they were able to an-



*"Ossification", by Nino Vecia.*

ticipate our plan of attack. He knows too much about us. This Elesh Norn you keep invoking sounds smart enough to use him against us."

"Smart, yes, all-knowing, no," said Melira. "Her forces are distracted by the rebellion. We have to keep moving."

They pressed deeper into the silent building, passing columns made of motionless bodies, walls that wept ivy-like trails of sinew and boasted row upon row of horrifically human-looking teeth, and a thousand other Phyrexian nightmares. The Fair Basilica knew no end, and they were going to see it all.

...

The winding stairway from the Fair Basilica down into the Mycosynth Gardens was accessed via a chamber below Elesh Norn's throne. It, too, was unguarded, and the Planeswalkers clustered together as the feeling of moving into a trap grew stronger. Tyvar fingered his piece of glimmervoid, waiting for the moment when he would need to convert his body to the harder, more resilient substance. Conserving his magic for the moment when it would be needed was harder than he would have expected; this place just made him want to stay armored at all times.

They were heroes all, grand allies in the fight against a terrible enemy, and he was glad beyond measure that his story had led him to their side. In the stories, the greater the losses, the greater the victory to follow. But it was hard to remember that now, under the weight of Phyrexia and the future.



At the base of the stair was a platform of shining blue metal—a small slice of the Fair Basilica that extended into the sphere below. The stairway they had used to descend was an enclosed column behind them, stretching back upward to the distant ceiling.

The column's first half, closest to the Fair Basilica, was white metal. As it approached the ground, it gave way to steely blueish-gray, becoming oddly textured, almost pebbled. Kaya blinked, raising her hand as if to touch the wall.

"No," said Melira, harshly. Kaya looked at her in surprise, lowering her hand again. Melira relaxed slightly, and explained, "It's mycosynth. This is how Phyrexia took us in the first place. They invaded Mirrodin's heart and sent their infectious spores cascading through everything we were."

Kaya glanced at the wall again, then stepped closer to Koth and his explosive team. "Good to know," she said.

"Forgive me, Melira, but I see no tree," said Tyvar.

Jace groaned.

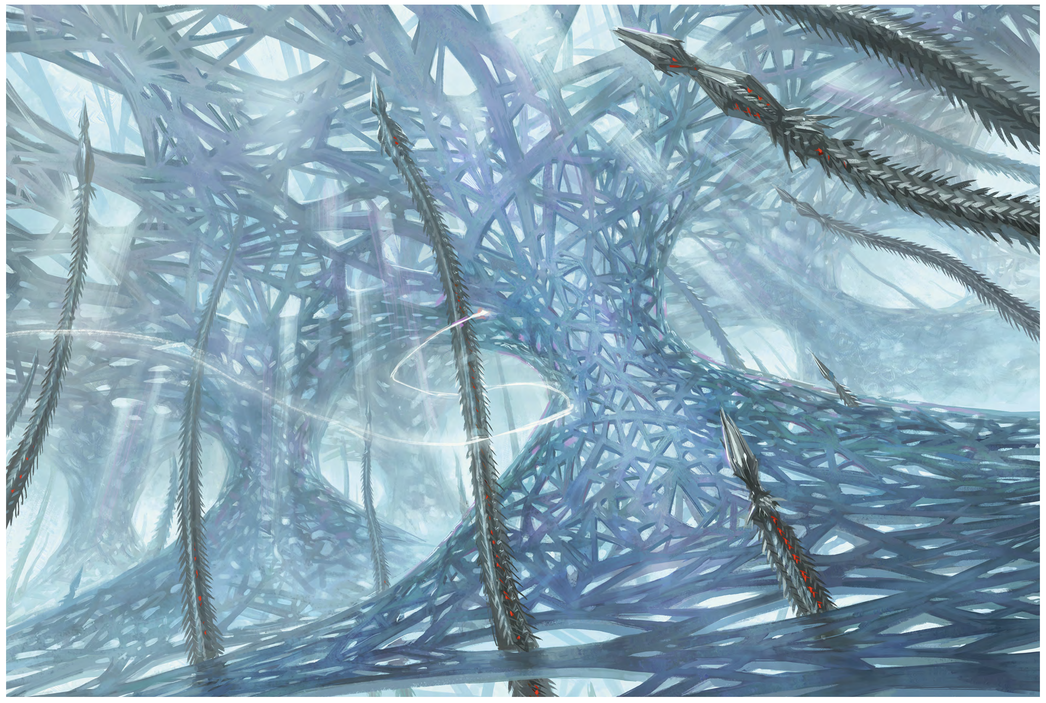
The group whipped around to see him clutching his stomach, split skin parting farther as the writhing metallic "veins" beneath fought for domin-

ion over the tissues of his body. He managed to straighten, eyes glowing faintly blue as his voice echoed in their heads.

*"Melira said we sought the Seedcore. We must go deeper."*

"Deeper," said Koth. "Yes. Elesh Norn forbids access to the Seedcore."

". But there is still a way," said Melira. "Elesh Norn can't pass through solid matter like your friend here." She hooked a thumb at Kaya. "We just have to reach the door. And get through it."



*"The Mycosynth Gardens", by Andrew Mar.*



The Planeswalkers looked around the metal-laced landscape, columned in delicate mycosynth, but saw no structures aside from the one to their back.

"Where?" asked Elspeth.

"This way," said Melira, and set out across the rough ground.

The others followed her, careful to avoid the mycosynth pillars, sticking close together to avoid surprises. She led them to a piled-up structure of fungal strands that twisted into a mimicry of entrails, as if some great beast had been gutted here.

Gesturing to the pile, Melira said, "The gateway into the Seedcore. It infects anything it touches," said Melira. "I guess Elesh Norn figures any Mirran strong enough to get this far deserves the honor of compleation. Luckily, I'm immune to phyresis—even the glistening oil doesn't stick to me for long."

As she moved closer to the pile, it heaved, pulsing, before opening into a terrible hole into darkness ringed with waving tendrils. An entrance masquerading as a monster anemone. The tendrils reached out, almost caressing her, and left a sheen of glistening oil behind. She wiped it away as she turned back to the rest.

Koth frowned. “Most of us don’t have your specific resistance, Melira. We’ll have to blow the ground.”

“Why are we messing with it? That loses us any cover we have,” said Kaito. “Isn’t there another way down?”

“I may have another way,” said Tyvar. He held up his of glimmervoid. “In the Coliseum, Kaito removed Phyrexian oil from my skin before it could work its way inside. If he can clean the oil off quickly enough, I can spread my magic through the lot of us while we pass through to the Seedcore. It will have to be quick. Transmuting this many people is a feat even I won’t be able to maintain for long. But it should lend us a measure of protection—enough for Kaito to do his part.”

“I can do it, but this stuff resists my telekinesis, and it’s going to give me a major headache,” said Kaito, stepping into position.

Melira frowned. “I suppose we can try,” she said. “How does this work?”

“Just give me a moment,” said Tyvar. “None of you will be able to access your own magic while mine lays across you, but that only means we move quickly.”

Kaito looked alarmed. “How am I supposed to clean the oil off if my magic is out of reach?”



“The Halo you took before should protect you enough for a few seconds,” said Koth. “We can buy you that much.”

Kaito nodded, and the group coalesced around Tyvar, who took a deep breath. The smell of green growing things swirled around them, cutting through the oily fungal scent of the mycosynth. Of the group, only Kaya recognized it as the smell of Kaldheim air. Metal began to spread across Tyvar’s skin, slowly at first, and then faster and faster, until his body was a glimmervoid sculpture.

The metal continued to spread, covering them all without difficulty. Jace was the last to be fully transformed, the injury on his arm appearing to almost resist the process, as if Phyrexia wasn’t willing to yield its hold for even a moment.

When the process was done, Tyvar held up his hand and said, “We move.”

They proceeded as a group into the caressing mass of tendrils, which brushed their hardened skins and left streaks of oil behind, but didn’t attack. Ahead of them was a narrow hall that ended in an open vestibule connected to what looked like a single bridge. They hurried on, not wanting to find the limits of Tyvar’s magic before they had cleared the hall.

At the end they emerged not into the terrible Phyrexian landscape they had all become accustomed to, but into something vital and alive, and all

the more horrific because it was growing. Tyvar looked to Kaito. Kaito nodded, and Tyvar released the spell.

The glimmervoid melted away, leaving them all flesh once more, skins glistening with oil. Kaito rolled his shoulders, and the oil lifted away from their bodies, coalescing into a ball that lobbed itself off the edge of the bridge.

"Thanks," said Kaya. "Hey, Tyvar, good show—Tyvar?"

He didn't respond. He was staring at something in the distance, stepping toward the bridge with eyes wide and cheeks gone pale.

Kaya turned, and beheld the Phyrexian World Tree. *Realmbreaker*.

It was clear that Elesh Norn had cultivated, nurtured, and corrupted it. Its bark was made of the white porcelain metal they'd seen above, and where growth had opened fissures in its surface, vivid, agonized red gleamed through. It wept glistening oil in place of sap, and strange shadows moved along its surface, confusing until Kaya glanced farther up. Long, white oblongs hung in the air near the highest branches of the impossible tree, fading partially into the distorted distance as they reached for the Blind Eternities.

"Invasion ships," said Koth grimly. "They're almost ready."



"This is a perversion of Kaldheim's very soul," said Tyvar. "I knew this was foul, but this…this is beyond imagining."

The air was still, eerily so, as if the entire realm was holding its breath. High above, in the distant branches of the reaching tree, a white light bloomed and flashed out, spreading in a horribly symmetrical lattice through the upper reaches of the sky.

"We have to hurry," said Jace.

They ran. The bridge connecting the Gardens to the core of New Phyrexia was a narrow line above a bottomless drop; at the other end of the bridge was a dark opening in the tangled roots of the tree. The Planeswalkers were nearly there when the sky flashed again, brighter this time, like a sun exploding in the high reaches.

The cataclysmic explosions filled the air with glistening rainbow distortions, followed by the bright impossibility of the Blind Eternities. Jace moaned. Elspeth stumbled, only saved from going over the bridge's edge by Koth's hand grasping her shoulder and yanking her back.

Kaya only stared upward, expression gone blank. "We're too late," she said.

"Kaya—" said Kaito.

She whipped around to face him. "*It was all for nothing,*" she snapped. "The World Tree has connected to the Multiverse. Elesh Norn can access the Blind Eternities. We *failed*."

"I refuse to let Kaldheim's heart be the weapon that destroys the Multiverse," said Tyvar. "We can still do our best to undo this."

"Hurry," said Jace, breathless. "We have to hurry." He only made it a few more steps, staggering, before collapsing to the ground.

"Tyvar," said Koth.

Tyvar nodded, and—touching the piece of glimmervoid—rippled to metal as he approached Jace and scooped the other man into his arms. Together, the group continued onward, into the opening, into the dark.

...

The entryway led into a cavity inside the tree, a great domed room formed from woven roots. Dark passages split off from the chamber, with the large one directly ahead seeming to be the main channel. At the center of the space, atop a low dais, was Karn.

The great silver golem had been broken open, vivisected and spread across the platform. Most horrifying of all, at the sound of their footsteps, he turned his head and croaked, "You shouldn't have come here. This place isn't for you."





*"The Seedcore", by Kasia 'Kafis' Zielińska.*

"Karn!" Koth and Elspeth hurried toward him but stopped short of touching him, staring at the damage.

"What have they done?" asked Elspeth.

"Isn't it obvious? They've rejected their Father of Machines." Karn shook his head. It seemed to be all the motion he had left to him. "Hurry. The invasion is still young. You may still be able to save some of the worlds. Unless…no. The Sylex was destroyed. All is lost."

"We made another," said Elspeth. "We can still end this."

Karn paused, clearly thinking. "You will need to get to the root source and detonate it."

"But—" began Melira, stopping at a sharp glance from Koth.

"I would take the burden from you if I could," said Karn. "It should have been my task all along. You should be free to go to your homes and protect them from what's about to come."

"You can't, though," said Kaya. "You can't even move."

"It's too late for me," said Karn.

"Not just you," said Jace, pushing against Tyvar's chest. The other man put him down, and he approached Karn, arm turned to show the spreading damage from his injury. "It's too late for me, too. Let me take the Multiverse from them."

He hobbled toward the doorway on the other side of the room. After an uncomfortable pause, Tyvar and Kaya followed.

Melira moved to kneel by Karn's head, wiping away the trails of glistening oil and attempting to shift him into a more comfortable position. Koth and the explosive team fanned out around him and began setting charges to free him from his restraints. Elspeth paused in the doorway, neither following the other Planeswalkers nor aiding Karn, and looked back at him.



"I should—they need—but do you want me to stay?" she asked.

"I want to say yes, out of selfishness, but I can't," Karn rasped. "I never thought you would see this world again. I'm so sorry. I wish you didn't have to die with us."

"It was my choice, Karn."

"You should go with your friends, and then get off this plane. Find a better place to make a final stand."

"No," said Elspeth. "No more running."

Karn sighed, voice apparently exhausted.

"We'll stay here to help shape the charges and aid Karn once he's free," said Koth. "Go."

"I wish I didn't have to."

"It's all right," said Melira, and summoned up a smile. "We made it farther together than I thought we would."

"I'll see you all soon," said Elspeth, and walked through the doorway toward the root source.

...

The final bridge was long and white and riddled with red.

So many of her friends, dead or lost. Ajani, his mind warped and his body doomed never to die now that he'd been absorbed into Phyrexia. Karn, possibly damaged beyond repair. Her anger was vast, and all the more agonizing because it was so new. She had lost more than she would ever have believed possible. She felt like her entire being was an old wound that had been sliced open, larger than ever and unhealable.

Elspeth broke into a run.

She caught up to the others halfway across the bridge, approaching a terrible replica of Elesh Norn's Altar. This one was made of Realmbreaker's woven roots, rather than ossified Phyrexian bodies, but clearly served the same purpose. It hurt the eye and beguiled the heart at the same time, and Elspeth hated it more than she would have thought possible.

Jace was back on his own feet; he glanced at her as she rejoined the group, giving a small nod of welcome, and said nothing. This place was as alive as the Basilica had been still: the air hummed with an uncanny chorus of discordant voices, layered across each other to form a harmony of inchoate parts, rather than the cacophony it should have been.

"Phyrexians can harmonize?" breathed Kaya.



Static shimmered in the air, which tasted bright with aether. The root ceiling above them gaped as they drew closer to the trunk, a tapestry of finer roots allowing them to look upward at the great bulk of the World Tree itself. It twisted through an open rent into the Blind Eternities, flashes of other planes showing through the haze. The upper branches crackled with the energy Tyvar called "Omenpaths." From this angle, they could see long gangways connecting the oblong white capsules of the invasion vessels to the trees. Phyrexians shuffled along the gangways, readying their assault on the Multiverse.

The smoke the vessels spewed was red. Red as blood, red as contagion.

"How many are there?" asked Kaya. "There must be millions of them," said Kaito, in quiet horror.

"They only showed us what they thought we were worth," said Jace. The white ships reached all the way into the highest branches, terrible fruit preparing for the harvest. "They've been down here preparing for the real fight all along."

Behind them on the bridge, they heard the sound of footsteps, steady and confident. As a group they turned, all with hands on weapons save for Jace, who clutched the Sylex and took a half-step back, away from the coming conflict.

There, walking toward them as calmly as if this were a pleasant afternoon meeting in a park, came Ajani and Tibalt, but not as they had known them. Ajani wore a suit of metallic red and white armor that appeared to have grown out of his body. It echoed the Fair Basilica, marking him as one of Elesh Norn's creatures. He carried a massive double-headed axe, the blades reversed in her honor.

Seeing her mentor draped in the livery of her greatest enemy made bile rise in Elspeth's throat, but not nearly as much as the smile that spread across his face at the sight of her. "Welcome," he called, and his voice was the same as it had always been. "Elspeth, my dear, it's wonderful to see you again. I'm so glad you survived to join me."

"I'm not here to join you," she spat, bringing her sword around in front of herself and gripping it tightly. "I'm here to stop you."

"Why would you want to do that?" he asked, with honest curiosity. "Now we can be together forever, perfect and harmonious. No more differences, no more conflict, no more pain. You will be home. We'll have the peace we've always sought. All will be One."

"Never," Elspeth said.

Beside him, Tibalt was a nightmare of bony plates and protrusions connected by raw, braided sinew, recognizable as himself only through the smirk on the remaining fleshy portion of his face. His tail, always



bifurcated at the tip, had split all the way to the base, and now terminated in two wicked stingers that dripped glistening oil onto the root path behind him.]

"You were a monster in Kaldheim, and now you finally look the part," said Tyvar, surprisingly calm.

"Little princeling too stupid to know when to be afraid," sneered Tibalt. "You were always going to end at my hand."

"Kaito, see the others to their destination," said Tyvar, not taking his eyes off of Tibalt. "Elspeth and I will handle the vermin."

"Tyvar—"

"Go," snapped the elf, without turning. "These fights were predestined as ours to win. The skalds will sing of the stand we make today, but only if someone survives to tell our story. Go."

"If you say so," said Kaito, and waved a sad, forced goodbye as he turned to offer his arm to the limping Jace, guiding him toward the doorway at the back of the room. Kaya followed with one last, regretful look, and the three vanished, leaving Tyvar and Elspeth alone with their transformed enemies.

"Very well then," said Tyvar, almost formally. "Shall we engage?"



*“Compleat Devotion”, by Filipe Pagliuso.*

Ajani roared as Elspeth leapt toward him, and Tibalt lunged for Tyvar as glimmervoid rippled across the hero’s skin, and the battle was joined.

The screaming followed not long after.

# EPISODE V
# Inevitable Resolutions

ELESH NORN'S INVASION OF THE MULTIVERSE HAS BEGUN!

The sounds of battle faded behind them as Jace, Kaito, and Kaya delved deeper and deeper into the miniaturized recreation of Elesh Norn's citadel built inside the Seedcore. The space was airy and infinite, filled with shafts of buttery, obscenely golden light untainted by the horrors it had filtered through. Try as she might, Kaya couldn't even guess at the light's origin; there was no sun so far below the surface of what had been Mirrodin, no obvious source of the illumination, but still the halls and rooms around them shone, the air glittering with the dissonant harmony of the unseen Phyrexian choirs.

Jace didn't look good. He was moving under his own power, but the wires growing through his flesh and bone were starting to break the skin, piercing through it and weaving themselves together in delicate loops, waving like cilia, even as they formed a shell around his arm. He had



*"Kaya, Intangible Slayer", by Marta Nael.*



shifted the bag containing the Sylex to the other side of his body, resting it against his hip as they hurried.

Kaya thought the worst sign was the fact that he was letting them see how far gone he was, rather than casting a soothing illusion over himself. He was like a cat that way; Jace never wanted anyone to see when he was hurt, preferring to mask the damage and present himself as perfectly fine. And now, he was walking wounded.

But then, they all were, in their own ways. Kaito walked with quick, efficient steps, his attention split between their surroundings and the hex-gold-gilded drone on his shoulder, which made cooing noises and rubbed against his cheek, clearly trying to soothe the anxious Planeswalker. Kaya might have cracked a joke about needing a teddy bear to cope with the stress of battle, but honestly, she wished she'd brought a friend with her. Even a small one who couldn't speak.

Of course, she had brought friends with her. She'd come with Tyvar, Vraska, and the others. And now here she was, moving through enemy territory with a stranger and a dead man, to help donate a bomb that could murder countless strangers. The Phyrexian threat was very real, and worse than she had feared.

Even still, there were people like Melira, who held hope in their hearts and blades in their hands, who were unwilling to surrender the fight. The

deaths had been unfathomable. The cost to the people of Mirrodin had already been more than could ever have been fairly repaid. They deserved so much better. Kaya knew, without question, that the Multiverse had no glorious architect, no kindly divinity making sweeping decisions about how things would play out, because no architect with a hint of kindness in their heart would have done such a thing to the innocents of Mirrodin. Even if someone were to argue that Phyrexia had as much right to exist as the rest of them, the fact was that the machine contagion was parasitic at best, predatory at worst. A Multiverse which contained Phyrexia would inevitably *become* Phyrexia, consumed by their terrible One. Only one version of reality could survive this conflict.

She knew which one she wanted it to be.

The sounds of battle faded behind them. Kaya was direly afraid the three of them were all that remained. Realmbreaker—out of respect for Tyvar, she couldn't even think of it as a World Tree—was compleated. Their friends were dead. There hadn't been any time to mourn, and the time they had left was so short that she wasn't sure there ever would be. If she died here, would she be mourned? Would any of them?

"I hate this place," said Kaito, voice low as he shattered the harmonic semi-silence. Kaya glanced at him, almost surprised. Jace didn't. He kept looking straight ahead, clearly forcing himself to keep going through what must have been unspeakable agonies.



"It's not right," said Kaito, looking directly at Kaya. "I'm not particularly sensitive to spirits, but Boseiju, the great tree in Kamigawa, exists in harmony with everything around it. It's filled with kami, with spirits. Everything in Kamigawa is. This place…the spirits have to have been consumed along with everything else, or they would be screaming without end. I don't think you'd have to be sensitive to pick up on that."

"No," Kaya admitted. The spirits Kaito talked about didn't sound like the sort of spirits she was used to dealing with, who were born from death, not naturally-born immortals. With as much death as this world had seen, she would have expected the air to be so thick with ghosts that it became hard to breathe, but there was nothing. She couldn't call any aspect of Phyrexia sterile, not when even the dust was designed to infect and consume the unwary. And yet "sterile" was the only word that came to mind when trying to describe the spirits of this place. Phyrexia didn't release its victims, not even in death.

The halls around them were empty, which felt less like a stroke of luck and more like one more inescapable piece of the massive trap that this entire mission had become. Kaya took a breath. Jace hadn't turned yet. They still had the Sylex. All was not yet lost. They moved in helpless hope—a helplessness that had only grown stronger since leaving Elspeth behind. Something about the other Planeswalker made it easy to believe the impossible might be possible after all.

That was gone now, along with Elspeth herself, and even if they won the day after this, they would still have paid far too dearly for their victory. Nothing was going to wipe clean the damage that had been done by Phyrexia.

Nothing.

The ceiling above them gave way to clear panels, like the wings of some great slumbering fly, translucent and organic and—like so much else in this terrible place—oddly, vitally alive, split by slightly darker veins that pulsed with glistening oil. Damaging the "skylight" would shower them in infection. Through the panels, they could see bridges of red sinew leading to the great invasion ships, endless ranks of Phyrexian warriors in the red and white of Elesh Norn's faction filing into the increasingly gravid holds of the waiting vessels. They were pregnant with Phyrexia, ready to spread this terrible seed throughout the Multiverse.

Red mist drifted down from the ships as they prepared for launch, adding a bloody cast to the skylights. The clear membrane absorbed the red particulates, cleansing itself every few seconds only to be smeared once again, an endless cycle of recovery and besmirchment. Kaya shuddered.

"This is a dead end," muttered Jace, darkly. "We're going to have to go back and try another direction."

Voice soft, Kaito said, "I don't think so. Kaya, Jace—over here."



They moved toward the lithe ninja, joining him around a hole in the floor. It looked like it was meant to be the entrance to a stairway, only someone had forgotten to construct the stairs. Instead, a roughly ten-foot drop led to a hovering disk of polished white metal, distinguished from the floor on which they stood by the absence of walls around it.

The hole was echoed by a larger hole in the disk below, exposing Realmbreaker's trunk as it vanished into mist marbled with lightning. This was as close as they were going to come to the core root of the tree.

"This is a world designed for falling through," said Kaya, trying to make it sound light, as she phased herself intangible and dropped to the disc below.

The smell of ozone, mycosynth, and what seemed like a horrible perversion of sweet Kaldheim air addressed her nose as soon as she landed, and she shuddered again, moving to position herself beneath the hole.

"Come on," she said, positioning herself to catch Jace when he dropped through. "Let's get this done."

Kaito eased Jace into a sitting position at the edge of the hole. The exhausted telepath slumped, still clutching the Sylex, legs dangling like a child preparing to jump off a swing. When he finally pushed off the edge, Kaito stabilizing him the whole time, Kaya had a brief, shameful flash of wanting to step out of the way and just let him fall. He was already lost;

she was inviting a monster into a bolt hole from which where was no escaping. But she held her place, and when he fell into her arms, she managed not to cringe away from the wires on his arms.

She couldn't stop herself from phasing as they nuzzled at her flesh, already carrying the Phyrexian need to spread the infection, and Jace looked at her with understanding, even as he stumbled to catch his balance.

*"It's almost over,"* he said, voice echoing inside her head without passing through her ears.

Privately, Kaya doubted that, and to Jace's credit, he allowed her to have her doubts without commenting on them. He moved to unpack the Sylex, revealing it to the Phyrexian air for the first time. Kaya took a step back. Kaito, who had dropped down unnoticed by either one of them, took a stop forward, stopping only when Kaya grabbed his arm.

"Let him have his space," she said. "This is delicate."

"Are you sure it's safe for us to be this close?" asked Kaito.

"Urza detonated the first one in his lap, and he lived," said Kaya. "We'll be fine. Probably." Assuming the plane survived.

Assuming the shockwave traveling up the tree didn't rip New Pyrexia apart from core to crust. It might still send the last of the Mirrans to oblivion, and all the Planeswalkers still on this plane with them. If Nahiri survived her fall and was clinging to who she had always been, she would be blotted out in an instant by the blast. So would Elspeth, and Tyvar, and all the others, even—



Kaya couldn't even form the shape of her own name in her thoughts. She had spent years dancing among the ghosts. If she died here, she wouldn't be leaving a ghost of her own behind.

"Wait," she said, as Jace moved to settle cross-legged next to the Sylex, placing his hands on the rim. The wires spidering from his arm recoiled from the metal, almost as if they recognized it for the looming disaster it was.

Jace glanced up at her, eyebrows raised in mild surprise.

"Are you sure we should do this?" Kaya asked. "The Invasion Tree has connected. 'Wipe it all clean'—that's what the Sylex says, right? The carvings? When you set it off, the blast will travel along the branches. It could damage or even destroy every plane it's currently in contact with. And we have no way of knowing which planes they are. Vryn, Tolvada, Ixalan—even Ravnica, they could all be casualties."

"If Phyrexia has reached them, they already are," said Jace.

"Hold on," said Kaito. "I came here to save Kamigawa, not to destroy it."

"The Sylex obliterates everything it touches," said Kaya. "Even time was fractured when Urza used the original. There was a chance Mirrodin

would survive before the tree was compleated—and the explosion would have been contained to this plane. Now, if it can travel through those Omenpaths that Tyvar saw forming in the branches…Jace, we could destroy everything. We could blow up the Blind Eternities. You have to wait."

"Vraska is dead and I am dying," said Jace calmly. "My body may continue, and turn the powers it contains against any of you who still live—and I would kill me before that can happen, if I were you. You have no idea how much time and energy I spend not destroying the minds around me just because I can, or how hard I've worked to find a way to move in a world of such simplicity without doing endless damage. I will be an incredible weapon for Phyrexian dominance." His eyes flashed with an inhuman blue glow, brighter than his norm, and he grimaced, visibly composing himself. "They're starting to speak through me, Kaya, we're out of time. Every moment we wait, every second we spend dithering over your sudden need to be the hero, not just the savior, means another plane is potentially lost. We're destroying nothing. We're preventing greater deaths. Blame Phyrexia, not us."

He sighed heavily, looking suddenly exhausted. "And there is no other way. Better to fulfill the promise of the Sylex and scorch the branches, sweep it all away, than to lose the entire Multiverse. Bring the ending. Topple the empires to bring a fresh start. Renew it all."





*"Bring the Ending", by L. A. Draws.*

He began to lift the Sylex into his lap.

Kaya moved instantly, lunging forward and grabbing his wrist before he could complete the motion. He pulled his hand out of her grasp and away from the Sylex, eyes narrowing.

She pulled a dagger from her belt. Jace's eyes began to glow. Neither of them said a word. Kaito looked between them, briefly confused, before pulling his sword and falling into position beside Kaya.

"I'm sorry, Jace, but I can't let you risk Kamigawa," he said.

"Very well then," said Jace, and slowly, laboriously, rose.

...

On the bridge over the void, Ajani's axe clashed against the blade of Elspeth's sword, pushing the smaller Planeswalker back even as she dug her heels into the sinewy surface and tried to stand her ground.

"You can't defeat me, young one," said Ajani, voice unnaturally calm and level. He spoke to her like she was a child who had tried to steal one too many sweets, who needed to be talked out of some unhealthy desire. His tone carried only affection and genuine concern under the calm, and if he had sounded any less like himself, Elspeth might have been able to bring her blade around and undercut his ankles, sending him toppling into the depths. "It's useless to try. Join us. We are the inevitable. We are the ideal. We are One, and once you come to be One with us, we'll be stronger in a way you could never have dreamt while you lived in flawed, imperfect flesh."

"Never," managed Elspeth, her defiance sounding weak to her own ears. "Ajani, if you can hear me, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for," said Ajani, pushing harder against her sword, trying to move into her space. He had yet to swing at her, allowing all the attacks to come from her...but now she couldn't disengage without opening herself too widely. Even defense could be a trap.



"So stop *fighting* us!"

"Phyrexia is no one's enemy," said Ajani. "We only want to bring you the peace and perfection of becoming One. We only wanted to bring you home."

"Then you're everyone's enemy," said Elspeth.

"So be it," said Ajani. "You do not need to be alive to join Phyrexia."

Ajani finally attacked, swinging his axe in a brutal arc accompanied by a blast of destructive magical force that narrowly missed Elspeth's head, digging a chunk out of the bridge behind her. She spung around, slashing at his knees, only for him to leap nimbly out of the way, moving with a speed that made her breath catch in her throat. The battle had already been joined. Now, it began in earnest.

...

Not far from Elspeth and Ajani, Tyvar used his blades to keep the twin barbs of Tibalt's tails at bay, holding the almost bestial Planeswalker as far back as he could. Tyvar's skin was still metallic and gleaming, his entire body having converted into glimmervoid for the sliver of protection it could offer him against the glistening oil that dripped like venom from Tibalt's body.

"Little prince," hissed Tibalt, a vicious smile on his distorted face. "Little pretender, little would-be hero, there will be no sagas in your name. If your legend survives this day, it will be a tale of failure. The saga of a man chosen by a greatness he could never have been worthy of. How does it feel to be the last prince of Kaldheim?"

"You're not the God of Lies," snarled Tyvar, bringing up his arm to block one of Tibalt's tails. "Even so, nothing you say can be trusted."

"Perhaps not, but you're too stupid to understand when you should be afraid," said Tibalt, whipping one tail away from Tyvar's hold and stabbing it toward the other man, barb glancing off the metal of Tyvar's shoulder.

Tyvar hissed in pain, and Tibalt hissed in pleasure, the two men united for the first and perhaps only time in their acquaintance.

"Pain, yes," said Tibalt, with great satisfaction. "*You* may be resistant to my charms, but that's only because your head is too empty to understand when you should doubt your convictions. Not everyone is so devoid of concern."

He looked away from Tyvar, the ultimate insult in the middle of a battle, and directed a thin-lipped, terrible smile at Elspeth as she struggled against her former mentor.

"Doubt," said Tibalt, oily smoke beginning to leak out the corners of his mouth. "The greatest weapon of them all."



...

Elspeth staggered as she blocked Ajani's latest blow, barely keeping her footing. A wave of misery and doubt washed over her. This was her fault. This was her fault. Ajani wouldn't have been infected if she'd been paying closer attention, if she'd been a better student, if she'd been less distracted by her own problems, if she'd been strong enough to save Mirrodin in the first place, rather than allowing it to fall to Phyrexia. If she'd been a better person, none of this would have happened.

If she had only fought her way down to the Furnace Layer faster, they would have reached the tree before it could connect, found Vraska before she could be compleated, saved so many others, saved them all. This was all down to her.

Ajani's next blow knocked the weapon from her hands, and Elspeth backed away, palms out, trying to ward him off. She couldn't even beg, not with the misery weighing her down.

Tibalt laughed, stabbing again and again at Tyvar, who staggered under the blows, horrified by the sight of Elspeth in retreat. Seeing her losing her faith in the fight...

It felt as if all hope was lost.

...

Kaya lunged for Jace, or rather, for the space where Jace *should* have been, and stumbled through the empty air of the telepath's projected image, the false Jace splitting like fog and dissipating.

"Kaya, please," he said.. "We're Planeswalkers. That means we owe a debt to something greater than ourselves, even when it isn't convenient, or ideal. We came here to save the Multiverse. Detonating the Sylex might destroy a dozen planes. It might also just shake them a little. Either way, the *rest will live*."

"The Multiverse isn't *dying*, you heartless—" Kaya caught herself, taking a deep breath. The Jace she had always known was meticulous about the privacy of the minds around him, keeping his telepathy under tight control. He would never have gone looking for her deepest fears, nor thrown her weaknesses in her face like that. Even when he'd sparred with Nahiri, he'd been careful to avoid saying anything that would imply awareness of her thoughts.

She couldn't *know* that he was reading her, but it certainly felt as if he were, and she didn't like it one bit. She narrowed her eyes. He had positioned himself between her and the Sylex, his slight figure presenting little barrier.

And then, abruptly, there were three of him, and none were the original. Kaya's physical form flashed translucent purple as she phased slightly



out of touch with the rest of the plane. She couldn't detect thoughts, not the way Jace could, but she could detect spirit energy, and two of the Jaces didn't have spirits. They weren't real. Only the third, the one farthest from her current location, actually existed.

She turned toward Kaito. "That one," she snapped, gesturing toward the Jace in question. "Stop him."

Kaito didn't need to be told twice. Producing a handful of shuriken from inside his shirt, he flung them at the true Jace, his telekinesis catching them and driving them straight and true toward their target. He had aimed to stop, not to slaughter, and as the projectiles found the flesh of Jace's injured arm, the two false images flickered and died.

Kaya shoved her dagger into its sheath, stalking toward the true Jace, and the Sylex.

*"Wait,"* said his voice. *"Please."*

Kaya stopped, eyes narrowed, glaring at the real Jace.

He looked back, pale and wan and younger than she had ever realized he was; he looked less like an all-powerful Planeswalker, and more like a man on the verge of collapse. The waving wires on his arm—which were, she finally saw, surprisingly like the tendrils of Vraska's hair in their sinuous curves and languid waving strands—had started to light up at their

tips, like their eyes were opening, even as they wove their basket-like lattice more and more tightly around his arm. Soon, they would cut off all circulation, if they hadn't done so already.

Kaito's shuriken had severed several of the strands, leaving them to writhe and die on the floor, and cut shallow, bloodless lines into Jace's skin. The speed of Phyrexian compleation was a nightmare the likes of which Kaya had never considered, and she wanted nothing more than to wake from it.

*We have to do this,* he said.

"No, you have to do this," said Kaya. "*We* have to preserve the Multiverse. All the planes Phyrexia *hasn't* touched are connected to the Blind Eternities as well, just like this damned tree—we blow it up now, we could wipe out everything."

"The Emperor," said Kaito, sounding horrified.

"Any Planeswalker currently in transit," said Kaya. "All of us. I won't let you do this." She lunged for the Sylex, grabbing it with both hands. "It's over, Jace. You lose. We all lose."

…

Elspeth fell back another step, unable to stand her ground against the waves of despair and doubt washing off Tibalt. She had failed, they had



all failed, Ajani was lost, and New Capenna was lost, and she was lost, this was how it ended, this had always been how it ended, she had been in denial to think she could do anything to stop it—

The doubt ripped at her, tearing away the veils of virtue and compassion that she had worked so hard for so long to construct, until the core of Elspeth Tirel was exposed. The child who had defied Elesh Norn in a world without any prayer of hope; who had been able to stay unbroken before Phyrexian horrors. Ajani, seeing his opening, swung his axe at the exposed back of her neck.

Elspeth's sword blocked the blow, unexpectedly raised between them. He paused, blinking in surprise, only to realize that the look in her eyes was that of a cornered, feral creature.

Not far away, Tibalt laughed. "Oh, the pretty do-gooder fights back, does she? A pity you didn't find her sooner, Prince of Foolishness, she might have been sufficiently useless to sit beside you. Although your brother would only have snatched her away as he does everything else worth having. You could have been great without him."

Tyvar snarled. When Tibalt stabbed the barbs of his tail at him again, he dropped one of his daggers and grabbed the offending appendage directly behind the stinger, bending it backward even as the glimmer-void that covered Tyvar's own body began to flow out, sweeping across

Tibalt's flesh as the transmutation spread to take him, almost Phyrexian in its own way.

Tibalt hissed, trying to pull free. Tyvar didn't let him go. The glimmervoid spread out to cover more and more of Tibalt's body. The flesh that had yet to be transmuted seemed almost to pull away, trying to flee the toxic change.

"What are you *doing*?" Tibalt demanded, in clear alarm.

"My magic suppresses whatever it engulfs," said Tyvar, and smiled, baring metal teeth like a threat. "Your doubt can't touch what it can't reach."

Indeed, Elspeth's stance grew in confidence by the moment, until two things happened: the glimmervoid swallowed the last of Tibalt's flesh, and a pulse of hope strong enough that it felt like it should have burned the infection entirely from Phyrexia, like it should have lit up the Blind Eternities, surged from her body.

"Doubt is nothing," said Elspeth. "Doubt doesn't change what's right. I will not join your One. Neither will anyone else."

White light blasted outward from her blade, sending Ajani rocking back on his heels. She stood, falling into an offensive position.

The fight wasn't over yet.



Ajani cried out and staggered. Elspeth slammed the hilt of her sword down across the back of his neck, driving him to the ground. The axe tumbled from Ajani's suddenly nerveless fingers as he slipped from consciousness.

Eyes wild, Elspeth turned toward Tyvar and the struggling Tibalt. Tyvar shook his head.

"I can handle this devil," he said. "He owes me a death for what he did to my world. Go. Find the others. I'll be fine."

421836: Tyvar's Stand | Art by Kieran Yanner

The glimmervoid was fading from his skin, and from Tibalt's as well, as the well of Tyvar's magic neared the point of running dry. Tibalt stabbed at him with his free tail, and Tyvar grabbed that one as well, bending them both backward with a strained grunt. Realizing what he was about to do, Tibalt tried to jerk away.

The last thing Elspeth saw before she ran off the bridge, following the trail the others had taken, was Tyvar driving the twin barbs of Tibalt's tail into the space that should have held the Phyrexian's heart. Tibalt screamed, high and agonized, and was still screaming as Tyvar shoved him from the

bridge. There was a sickening crunch as Tibalt slammed into the bridge below, followed by silence.

Elspeth ran.

…

Kaya grabbed the Sylex, relaxing at the solidity of it before she dismissed her phase and turned solid once more—only for the Sylex to dissolve in her hands like mist. She had fallen for another of Jace's illusions.

"Kaya!" shouted Kaito.

She spun to face Jace just in time to see the wires spidering across his face, eyes glowing a brighter blue than ever before. "No," she gasped.

Jace, face grim, looked at her across the rim of the real Sylex, still held in his hands, and replied, quietly, "Yes. Kaya, I'm sorry. Kaito, I'm sorry. Everyone," and there he chuckled, dry and dark and unamused, "I'm so sorry."

He disappeared, shielded from view by his own magic.

On the other side of the illusion, Jace ran his thumbnail across his forehead, almost amazed by how quickly the skin parted…although what dripped from the wound into the Sylex wasn't blood, not exactly. He sighed. So much lost. So much left to lose.



With an almost physical effort that caused him to flicker into momentary visibility, he forced his grief and fury into the bowl. Not only his grief: the suffering and sorrow-drenched agony of all Mirrodin. Regret for the Multiverse. The love of Vraska. It poured into the Sylex like the finest honey, so thick and pure he could almost see it.

The words didn't matter. Jace knew that, but they felt right anyway. Urza had said them so long ago. Teferi had seen it, and Kaya through him, and Jace through her. An unbroken line—then to now. One end, to another. "Wipe the land clear. Bring the ending," he murmured. "I'm sorry."

His voice echoed in the enclosed space, impossibly loud, as light bloomed inside the bowl of the Sylex, crawling upward like a living thing, nearing the rim. Kaya cried out, fear and despair, as Kaito moved to put himself between the blossoming light and the other Planeswalker. Neither of them saw Elspeth drop through the hole in the ceiling and race across the room toward Jace.

Jace turned to face her, his eyes ablaze with merciless blue light. Somehow, in that moment, she understood everything—what Jace had resolved to do, what was about to happen not just to Mirrodin but to the Multiverse itself. Elspeth saw, with perfect clarity, what needed to be done.



*"Vanish into Eternity", by Magali Villeneuve.*

She didn't hesitate. In a single convulsive motion, she drove her blade through Jace and shoved him aside, letting his body take the sword with him as he fell and grabbing the Sylex in her own hands.

She had time to glance at Kaya and Kaito as light crested over the lip of the Sylex and a sharp crack echoed through the room, marking her disappearance. The Sylex went with her, bound for some unknown destination, some point beyond the Blind Eternites.



Tyvar, bloodied and once more flesh, dropped through the hole to join Kaya, Kaito, and Jace's fallen form, moving to Kaya's side. She turned to him, eyes wild.

Whatever Tyvar was going to say was washed away as a series of massive booms consumed all sound, a wave of pressure washing down the trunk Realmbreaker as it pulsed with light. Each pulse lit the air with an oil slick array of impossible colors, yanking the world around them through a cycle of nights and days as quickly as a heartbeat. The tree had been fully activated, and was transmitting across the Multiverse.

The shock knocked all three of them to the floor, and in the rapidly pulsing light, none of them saw the moment when the wall irised open like an eye, allowing the smell of aether to fill the previously sealed room.

Tyvar staggered to his feet, pulling Kaya with him. Kaito had already recovered his balance on his own, and was staring upward, rapt and horrified. The others looked up, and saw the branches of Realmbreaker winking out in flashes of impossible light, connected to the tree but gone at the same time. Tyvar made a small sound of dismay.

"They walk the Omenpaths," he said. "They carry disaster in their wake."

Each branch, with its heavy burden of Phyrexian invaders, had reached for another plane, and would shed their terrible fruit there, to compleat new, fertile soil.

"The Sylex is *gone*," Kaya moaned. "Elspeth is *gone*, Jace is *gone*, the Multiverse is doomed, we failed, Tyvar, we failed."

"I saw hope this day," said Tyvar. "We haven't failed."

"Um, guys?" said Kaito, he gripped his sword with both hands and stepped up to stand with Tyvar, the two of them presenting a wall of resistance between Kaya and the opening on the wall. The faint sound of footsteps came from the other side.. "I think we're about to have company."

The trio shrank back from the new doorway, until Kaya's shoulders were almost touching the pulsing, gleaming trunk of Realmbreaker. All three readied their weapons, Tyvar's flesh transmuting once more to glimmer-void as he stood side by side with the wiry ninja. They exchanged one final glance, expressions equally grim.. Nothing approaching in Phyrexia could be a friend, not in this moment, not in this space.

Footsteps echoed into the room, unbearably loud, bouncing off the walls and ceiling. A figure, almost skeletally thin, made of flensed red tissue and gleaming porcelain-white metal, stepped into the room. Elesh Norn turned her eyeless face toward the remaining Planeswalkers and smiled, even as a squadron of Phyrexian warriors slipped in after her. Kaito gasped sharply at the sight of Tamiyo moving among them, all her softness sharpened to bladed points, her eyes traced by black trails of glistening oil.



"Welcome, weary travelers, to Phyrexia," said Elesh Norn. She turned her smile to Jace's corpse, which shuddered and stood, Elspeth's sword slipping from his body as he moved to join his new master. Kaito grabbed the blade as soon as it was unprotected, settling it into his free hand.

Elesh Norn laughed. "So worried," she said. "We offer you no threat. We offer only harmony and peace. We are One. All will be One. Why resist? Your friends are already here."

She turned her smile toward the ranks of her subordinates. They parted, and a new shape moved through them, into the light.

Nahiri had clearly not survived her fall. The spikes that had been breaking through the skin of her back and shoulders were more pronounced now, turning her outline into a grotesque parody of her own floating cloud of blades. Her hands were gone, arms replaced from the elbow down with metal blades. Cracks ran through the metallic skin of her body, showing molten metal beneath, and her eyes glowed with the same terrible, burning heat.

Kaito hissed between his teeth, seeing the very opponent he had feared appear before him. "You've looked better," he said.

Nahiri didn't react. Another figure followed her on a forest of whip-thin cabling, using the root-link formations of her lower body like tentacles as she settled by the other Phyrexian's side. Extra appendages sprouted

from the woody protrusions covering her flesh. Her face, like Tamiyo's, was marked with glistening oil. Kaya stared. The Nissa she knew was gone. Nothing of the soft-spoken animist remained.

Tyvar bared his teeth, adjusting his grip on his daggers. To see another elf so maimed and misused was painful, despite the shortness of their acquaintance. This was more than horror. This was an offense.

"Nahiri fought us, but she found peace, and a better way in the One," said Elesh Norn. "She and Nissa came from the same place, but they were never friends. Now they are sisters, united, finally on the same side in every way. They are One. You, too, can be One. Only yield, and it will be over quickly."

"No," said Tyvar.

"I'm good," said Kaito.

"Go to hell," said Kaya.

"Such hostility," said Elesh Norn. "It seems we have no way to an accord, then. If you would be our enemies, then very well. Enemies it is."

With that, Elesh Norn raised her hand, clicking her perfect claws together, and the invasion began.

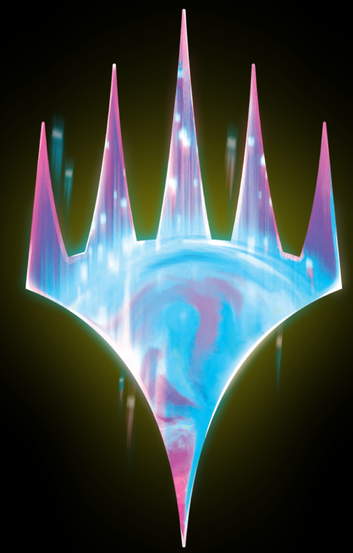




*"All Will Be One", by Chris Rahn.*



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# MARCH OF THE MACHINE

By K. Arsenault Rivera

# EPISODE I
# Triumph of the Fleshless

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ELESH NORN DISPATCHES HER EVANGELS
TO EVERY CORNER OF THE MULTIVERSE
TO SPREAD HER GOSPEL.

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It is good to be Phyrexian.

It is good to be Elesh Norn.

This has always been true, but never more so than now. Three worms—Kaya, Kaito, and Tyvar, the others called them—are before her begging for mercy. Oh, they don't do it out loud, but Norn sees it. Norn understands. Fear haunts their eyes and their too-stiff bodies. Weapons tremble in pale-knuckled hands. How misguided they are. If they submit, she could do away with all of their faults, but she knows they'd turn down such a magnanimous offer, such an act of benevolence. There is no point in asking.

Just as there is no point in their efforts.

All will be one. And it won't be very long, now.

"Stay with us," she tells them. "Behold the glory of New Phyrexia."

"Go to hell," says the smallest. The largest moves toward her—but the other pulls him back. Typical. Discord lives within the hearts of the non-believers. Even when there are so few, they are never truly united.

If only they could see that.

A mere flick of Norn's wrist is enough to summon the portals—everything in this place is keyed to her will. Metal clicks and slides and rearranges around them. Five irises open on five alternate worlds. No matter how their skies started—warm violet, slate gray, or coal black—they now pulse with red light. Phyrexian symbols blaze among the clouds. It is from these portals that she now watches the invasions. Realmbreaker's massive, barb-tipped limbs burst forth, anchoring themselves wherever they please. Rivers of blessed oil run onto the earth. Pods fly from the secured barbs, soaring in all directions—but always in perfect sync. Some birth centurions, some birth golems, and some lie in wait for the lost souls they will soon welcome.

To the three lost creatures before her, a sunrise is beautiful. Phyrexia knows better. Thousands of mouths speaking with one voice; thousands of eyes with a single vision; thousands of minds with only one thought. That is beauty.



And they've created it with their own multitudinous hands.

"Have you ever known such unity?" she asks.

The smallest one opens her maw. Before the words come out, another far more pleasant voice cuts her off. "We've done as you asked."

Lukka—that is his name, isn't it? One of the humans retches at the sight of him, but to Phyrexia, he's a shining example of the future that awaits them. Oh, so he was rough around the edges. They'd smooth those soon enough. Flesh trembles at its own destruction; it's only natural.

Norn turns toward her holy evangels. Jace slips off—he knows what Norn wants, of course, knows before she has to say a thing. Three more arrive in lockstep: Lukka, Atraxa, and Ajani. Nahiri trails behind, the newest member sent to fetch her fellows. Carried like a trussed up offering between them is the once-powerful Sheoldred. Out of her armor, she is pathetic and small—an overgrown Newt who once dreamed of Praeterdom. All of Phyrexia knew she was only a pretender to the title. Now it's finally laid bare.

Lukka and Ajani present their quarry. Sheoldred spits, her black spittle falling well short of its target. Tied as she is, her natural inclination is to try and wriggle free. How satisfying to see her reduced to this.

"What shall we do with her?" asks Ajani. His eyes flick to the prisoners. "Or do they need dealing with first?"

Norn beholds the little worms, so afraid. Already they're skittering backward. Their plans are as obvious as their terror: leave New Phyrexia, tell the others, gather their meager forces and mount a counterattack. So the efforts of the fleshbound often go. Where has all that struggle gotten them? Here in the inner sanctum, hopelessly outnumbered, they still think there's a way out of this.

It's amusing—in the way that death is amusing once you've transcended it. "You want to leave, don't you? Phyrexia shall permit it. On one condition," she says. "Nahiri—restraints."

Stone springs from the ground, encasing the three imperfect Planeswalkers. Only their heads remain unimpeded. It won't work forever, Norn is well aware—she saw the smallest one phase through solid matter earlier—but it will serve its purpose. And if they spit on her benevolence, then they've earned their fates.

"You shall be the prophets of our coming," she says. "In time you shall tell your unbelieving brethren what you have seen: a united future."

"What a joke," Sheoldred whispers. Speaking strains her chest against its bonds. "All of this grandstanding won't change the truth: you're only looking out for yourself, Norn. Phyrexia means nothing to you unless it



conforms to your mad ravings. You've never cared about unity, you only care about yourself."

"Is that so?" Norn repeats. She slams on the arm of her throne. "Elesh Norn's cares are Phyrexia's cares. The Etchings demand we spread the glory of New Phyrexia, Sheoldred. Long have you tried to rot away our holy teaching from within—but the time for that is since past. Our future is gleaming and perfect, free from your stain. Phyrexia no longer has a place for those who crave power over unity. Ajani—execute her."



*"Corrupted Conviction", by Joseph Weston.*

For once, Sheoldred does more than whisper. Whatever her screaming protest may be, it's lost in the swift descent of the axe. Sheoldred's head bounces to a stop at her feet, smearing black ichor across the porcelain floor. Norn pays it only a moment's attention; her servants will remove the corpse for processing. One mustn't waste perfectly good parts—they will serve Phyrexia as Sheoldred could not. Muscle strains against stone as the largest of the prisoners tries to wriggle free. Given enough time, he will.

Elesh Norn counts on them escaping. There must be those who spread the gospel, after all, and they cannot do so from here. Once they understand how futile it is to fight the inevitable, they can depart.

But once more to the work, once more to the invasion.

"Rejoice, blessed evangels," she begins. "Our symbol blazes across the planes, our sacred words in its shadow. Soon, we shall awaken the Multiverse from its slumber. The glorious light of compleation—of New Phyrexia!—is nigh. With the barrier of their skin removed and their minds joined to ours, the others will soon come to know the ecstasy of Phyrexia as you do."

Keening howls ring within the sanctum, carried up from the bowels of New Phyrexia. How beautifully they sing that which cannot be put to words!

The evangels try to join their voices to the masses—but they are new, their throats too delicate. A lackluster addition. A choir is only a choir if



each voice works in harmony with the others. The dissonance they cause is grating... and disappointing.

"Quiet upon the congregation!" she screams.

And lo, there is quiet.

"Our work is not yet done. We stand before the untarnished glory of eternal compleation; we need only take our final steps toward it. For your zealous service and devotion, we have decided to grant you the honor of uniting your homelands. Tell us—Nahiri, where is it you were born?"

The kor has too much flesh by far, but they made do with what they could given the time. "Zendikar," she says. "Many lifetimes ago, I was born on Zendikar."

Norn nods. "Nissa," she calls. "Show us this place."

Nissa is the finest gift the Planeswalkers have given Phyrexia. Even standing at Norn's side, she can steer Realmbreaker's attention. To say nothing of her combat capabilities. If things continued at this rate she might overtake Tamiyo as Norn's favorite new servant—but there's yet time to see. And, in truth, all serve Phyrexia in their way.

The portals shift, joining together into a long oval. Disparate images ripple and reform into something new, something whole, something *complete*. Before them: an ancient forest, the trees thick as towers. What

little can be seen of the sky is as verdant as the canopies overhead. Elves move among the branches like ants in a hive, each armed, each looking up, each waiting for *something*.

They do not realize how soon it will find them. The branches they stride along bend into Phyrexian shapes; holes within trees and stone herald the shapes their bodies will take. Norn's portal is far from the only one: Phyrexia's thousand eyes stare down upon them as they stare up. Nahiri snarls at Nissa. "The Mother of Machines cares not for these trifles. Show her one of the skyclaves." Again the image ripples. This time, the canopy of trees frames a view of a floating city. Hedrons surround it like the feathers of a withdrawn bird. Stark white against the sky, its edges harsh and precise, Norn finds it immediately beautiful. Perhaps the shorter-lived could make something useful after all.

"You have plans for this?" Norn asks.

Nahiri nods. "Yes, Grand Praetor. This is a relic of my people—an ancient weapon we once used to dominate the plane. I can wake it once more to enact our will."

A smirk curls Norn's lips. "You wear your new purpose as well as you wear your raiment. Go to this place; our forces will meet you there."

Nahiri needs no further instruction. In three steps, she winks out of existence, the sanctum resounding with a boom. Norn glances to the



prisoners once more. Gone already; they must have timed their departure with Nahiri's to conceal the sound. What pitiful creatures, to turn away from such beauty.

"Lukka. How will you bring the glory of Phyrexia to your home?"

Sheoldred's blood still stains his face and carapace. "O Reverend Mother, I will bring it to heel."

"Specifically, Lukka," she says. "That you will bring it to heel is a given."

A grunt leaves him; he shifts his weight side to side. "...The monsters," he offers at last. "Once they've joined the fold, the others will cower before us."

She does not like this answer—it implies that the humans don't already cower before them. Neither does she like the simmering anger beneath the surface, anger which lends itself to missteps. Bloodlust is all well and good in a brute, but in a lieutenant? The Planeswalkers would exploit it. Lay a trap for him that he couldn't ignore. Faced with staying to ensure the compleation of the plane or bolting off to settle a personal grievance, Lukka would always choose the personal grievance.

"Very well," she says. "Go to Ikoria. Add these monsters to our ranks. But do understand what the price of failure is, Lukka, and don't forget your true home. You have been anointed with the sacred oil of New

Phyrexia—you are no longer a creature of base instinct, you belong to a greater whole."

"And ever may it reign," he says.

His departure is as swift as Nahiri's, and its effects as palpable. Norn allows herself to wonder how much more quickly all this might have come together if Phyrexia had the same ability.

No, it is good Phyrexia had to carve its victory from the spine of an uncaring world. Anything less would have left them unsuited to the job.

"Grand Praetor," says Tamiyo.

Norn is shaken from her thoughts. "Yes?"

"He will most certainly die on Ikoria," she says. "A bullheaded man often makes hasty decisions—I imagine you intend for it to go that way?"

"If he fails, he goes the way of Sheoldred, and one of you rains judgment upon him," Norn answers. "If he succeeds, the plane is ours, and he will serve penance for any mistakes to our satisfaction. Either way Phyrexia is served."

Tamiyo nods. "As I thought. You are as well reasoned as ever."



"The Grand Cenobite does not make mistakes," says Atraxa. The others are unaccustomed to her voice—they find it harsh and painful, a shard of glass to their delicate eardrums. Even Ajani flinches.

Norn does not. "Indeed. Tamiyo—was it Kamigawa you called home?"

"Once, before I came to understand the truth of things," she says.



*"Swamp", by Raymond Bonilla.*

"Nissa," Norn commands. The single world is all it takes. Once more the portals ripple and shift. The world that greets them shines beneath a night sky. Artificial lights illuminate a glittering city. The view swings closer, as if on the end of an arrow, and soon they are within the city itself, tiered structures looming near the shore, reaching for the dark above. The people walking the streets are soft and pliable.

It strikes her that no one is panicking. Perhaps they've realized compleation is nothing to fear—but it is more likely they do not know it is coming, in spite of the portals overhead. Here in the moments before the barbs make anchor, these people go about their pointless lives. A man ingesting some sort of food. He speaks to another person situated at a small stand offering more of the same, asking him a question whose answer will soon be irrelevant. A woman walking with two of her offspring. They are begging for an extra helping of the candy in her hand. She tears off pieces for each, leaving herself without—a sacrifice no one will remember in light of what's about to happen.

Tamiyo watches, too. Her grip tightens around an iron-bound scroll. Among the evangels she is the only one not covered in blood.

"Did you love Kamigawa?" Norn asks.

"I did," Tamiyo says. "A land of heroes and scoundrels, betrayers and champions. It seemed there were a thousand possibilities for how life might change in the future. I wanted to see them all. And I wanted to discover, with my family, which one was true. Now I love what it will become."



"Your family," Norn repeats. Ajani crosses his arms—he is listening intently, knowing there will be questions for him, too. "Do you still care for your family?"

Tamiyo watches the woman and her offspring as they walk down the street. Overhead the first slivers of white come into view. The woman continues. She swings the hands of her children, or they swing hers.

Then, as if remembering she was asked a question, she turns. "I want them to understand what I've come to know about the world—about unity. If we are all compleated then we need never be apart again," she says.

"You understand," Norn says. "Our family is greater than any you've ever known. Welcome the old into the new with open arms, Tamiyo."

There is no true silence in the beating metal heart of Phyrexia. Metal slides on metal as its denizens go about their great holy work; pistons animate beings beyond human understanding; blades cut away that which is impure. Here, too, they can still hear the distant sounds of Sheoldred's final contributions: the crack of chitin, the tear of sinew.

Yet the silence that follows Norn's words is there all the same. Tamiyo watches the screen and makes no sign that she's heard Norn's blessed command.

Realmbreaker pierces the earth. Tiered buildings shudder and shed their layers—whole floors tumble away. All around the tiles are falling like jagged porcelain snow. In only an instant the small food stand is crushed. Red spills from beneath, joining the babbling water.

The mother picks up her children, one in the crook of each arm, and runs.

"Tamiyo," Norn repeats. This hesitation sticks between Norn's pointed teeth.

A man in black streaks across their view. In a storm of brilliant cuts, the falling tiles are split, directed away from the family.

They see no more of what happens—Atraxa takes flight, blocking the view with her wings. When she speaks, her voice is sharper than the sword, sharper than the unseen knives at work not far away.

"Insolence isn't tolerated here. You were given a command."

Tamiyo starts; Ajani flinches. She turns, blinking. "I-I'm sorry, I've no idea what came over me—"



"See that whatever it is, you eradicate it," Norn says. "There can be no space for it. Return with Kamigawa under your control or be recycled into something that serves better."

"As you wish," she says. The sense must have gotten back into her—she no longer hesitates in leaving, and does not once look up toward the display.

There are only four of them in the room once Tamiyo has gone. Nissa, standing at her side, her eyes clouded with green. Ajani, who watched Tamiyo go, waits for his next set of orders. Atraxa remains airborne. With every flap of her wings her anticipation is palpable.

But patience is a valuable lesson to learn.

"Ajani," she says, and he inclines his head. "What am I going to ask you?"

"To show you the place where I was born," he answers.

"No. Your destiny is greater than that. We believe you know where it lies."

It is not silence that comes between them then but understanding. When he turns toward the mirrors, it is with confidence. "You want to see Theros."

"Quite right."

Black covers the surface of the mirrors, black shines bright, black reflects something new.

A city stares back at them—one unlike the last. Wine-red waves lap at golden shores; white houses dot a verdant countryside. Where Kamigawa was swathed in the night, this place is brilliant under the light of the sun. Ships sail beneath the outstretched swords of two guardian statues. On their decks, fishers wonder why their catches have contorted into strange shapes. On the cliffsides, astronomers debate the meaning of the portal's appearances.

It is as peaceful a view as anyone might imagine, if they do not look closely.

Norn's heart brims with excitement. They are so close to perfection, so close to a deeper understanding. And she knows it will not be long: Theros is among the first wave of targets.

And it seems they're going to get a good view of the festivities.

It starts the same as it did on Kamigawa: great white branches bursting from the portals. There are no trees to be seen here, but the roots find purchase all the same. Pods deploy before the tree has finished its work, so eager is Phyrexia to lay claim to this place. Some burst midair, giving birth to a swarm of insectoid convertors. The wind carries the storm of blades to the market. Metal glints in the skies above, hunks of white porcelain dropping to the earth, hulks cratering the buildings they land upon. Marble crumbles like sand; black oil streaks across the white. Temples bolt their doors only for the war machines of Phyrexia to batter them down. Winged constructs devour livestock and humans alike, some descending on the ships to find their meals. Nets do little to stop them; spears bounce off their proud carapaces.



Phyrexia is hungry. Elesh Norn is hungry. Every clamp of their jaws brings the taste of blood to her tongue—an offering from the chorus to her. She is with them, and they are with her, and soon this place will be one.

"It seems our forces are doing well without me," Ajani says.



*"Ephara, Ever-Sheltering", by Johan Grenier.*

"At slaughtering the weak and capturing the useful," Norn says. "They will be far more efficient once you are there to lead them."

"You wouldn't be sending me there for such trivial reasons."

He has seen more than he should have, then. Commanders are best when they're clever, but also at their most dangerous. To be clever is to be individual, and within Phyrexia all are one.

Elesh Norn will have to remind him of this. Possibly with new modifications.

"Theros is important to the future of New Phyrexia."

As if to help deter further questions, the battle on the other side of the portal escalates. Nissa's shifted the view to that of someone standing on the shore. Partially submerged in the water is a temple. Atop that temple is a hand swathed in the shifting black of the night sky, dripping rivers onto its steps. Only when their unseen observer looks up does the full picture become clear: there is something guarding the place. Part woman and part something else. Strangest—and most tantalizing—is the way parts of her fade in and out of existence.

A creature of that size could conquer whole planes on her own when compleated. Still, if size was the only thing that interested Phyrexia, Norn would have sent someone more trustworthy to Ikoria.



No—whatever this thing is, it's more than just something huge: it is something Elesh Norn wants.

"That," she says, pointing with one porcelain finger. "You are to bring that within Phyrexia's embrace."

Ajani studies the creature. Nodding once, he looks to Norn. There is something like a smile on his muzzle as the plan becomes apparent to him. "Ah—now I understand, it's the gods you're after."

*That's* one of their gods? Norn expected more of deities. Not that there are any in existence who could hope to challenge Phyrexia now that it's taken its proper place. While this creature is majestic in a way, it's far from pure. Already Norn's mind races at the possibilities.

"Bring priests with you," she says. "Bring the Argent Etchings. We will defeat these gods on every possible battleground. For those wise enough to realize the truth of the world, lend them the power to enlighten their former friends."

"The Etchings will make it easy. It's belief that makes gods on Theros, not the other way around," he says. "Once the people understand the truth, the gods will follow." He looks once more over his shoulder. The creature—the god—has driven a bident through one of their attack ships. On the shore what sailors remain throw their arms around one another

in celebration. Wide smiles break out across their faces, made strange by the fear that clings to their eyes.

Deep down, they know it will not be enough.

And this brings Norn an untold, ineffable joy.

"Go," she commands.

He does. Ajani, ever loyal, does as he is told. As he winks out of existence she allows herself a moment of pride in his recruitment and creation.

And pride, too, that he did not discover the real reason she'd sent him to Theros. That's fine enough. Even ignorant of his goal, he'd accomplish it.

Only Atraxa and Nissa remain in the sanctum with her.

"Mother of Machines, highest and holiest of authorities, I live to serve," Atraxa offers.

"You needn't waste your time on such inefficiencies," Norn says. "You're well aware there's a reason your task has come last."

A slight flinch at the reprisal, visible only to the woman who shaped Atraxa's body with her own two hands. The others could lay claim to whatever parts they wished—but Norn knew Atraxa best, and Norn had her heart. Nothing remained of her former life save that which made her perfect. "Whatever New Phyrexia asks of me shall be done."



"Nissa—our missionaries once went aground on a place called Capenna. Show us what's become of it."

It takes longer for the visions before them to change. Frustrating, but not unexpected; this isn't a place Nissa knows well. When at last the view comes into focus, they are staring at a golden gate surrounded by white marble. Inscriptions surround the rim. Norn can't read the language and has no care to. Not that she could even if she'd been familiar with it to start: a shimmering golden haze renders all the fine details fuzzy.

Atraxa says nothing, but she does look up toward Norn. How like a vat-slick, freshly born Newt.

"Our predecessors found this world by ancient means," she says. "Though it was thick with a holy stench, they saw within it something valuable—something worth the risk its guardians presented. For the better part of a year they lingered, taking whatever they wished, conducting vital research on the populace, spreading blessed corruption wherever they tread."

"Until something sealed them away," Atraxa offers. Good; she's beginning to understand why she was chosen for this.

"Indeed. Angels. False prophets bound to stone for their insolence," Norn says. These words must have weight for Atraxa. She lets them ring before continuing."Fearing the truth we would bring to their people—a unity the likes of which they could never promise—they grew desperate.

They gave up their physical forms to suppress our ship's influence. For years we have been here, and for years we've not accomplished a thing. That ends now."

"It will be done," says Atraxa. "I will free the ship—"

"The ship itself is of no concern to us. Had they been faithful they would have triumphed. If you do uncover it or its crew, you are to scavenge them for parts. Compleation is a gift they no longer deserve."

"As you wish," Atraxa says.

"Nissa—show us the atrocity they've constructed."

The view shifts to another nighttime sky, and to the city glittering beneath it. No—Norn refuses to think of it as a city. The towering needle reaching for the stars is an affront in every way. Even without a haze of gold it would reek of decadence. Everywhere the eye falls there is something to appall it: golden shells mounted to vertical shuttles, a sickening worship of fur evident in their coats and dress, the foul noise they called music played by the unworthy tubes of flesh. Its height is hubris, and hubris is its height. All of this constructed on Phyrexian bodies. All of this to keep them away.



"Burn this into your memory. Never forget what they've done to us, what they've constructed here. The faithless consider themselves divine, Atraxa, but divinity exists only in unity."

"All must be as one," Atraxa echoes. From her grip on her weapon, she has little love for the view. "What is it you wish me to do?"

"Teach these people the price of their insolence. They could have joined our ranks, once, but they will no longer find any such mercy from us. You will harvest them all."

"It will be done," Atraxa says. With a flap of her wings she approaches the bridge to the tree—but Norn raises a hand to stop her.

"There is one other task for you," she says.

Atraxa waits in midair.

Norn points. "The angels that lent this place their protection still guard it today—albeit in a new way. The haze we see here is what remains of their ethereal forms. The faithless call it Halo, and it will be anathema to you. Until you bring the tower down and wake the angels from their rest you will be unable to escape its influence. Your most sacred duty on this plane is to find its wellspring and destroy it."

Atraxa's chin dips lower. She looks to the mirrors, then to Norn. "Mother of Machines, it is not my place to question you..."

"Indeed it isn't," Norn says. "But your question will be permitted. Speak it."

Whatever the question may be, Norn will answer. Atraxa is already bound to the will of New Phyrexia—ultimately, it makes no matter what Norn's answer is, so long as there is one.

"….If the ship has been lost for untold years and the atmosphere is poisonous, why not leave this place to the centurions? Why am I being given the task?"

"The reasons are threefold. First: it is a glorious task, and completing it announces your worth to all. Second: your previous life may lend you some protection to this 'Halo.'"

There are no true silences within the sanctum—but there is something like it as Atraxa waits for the third item, and Norn thinks of how to phrase it.

"Third: there exists a danger to New Phyrexia. In killing New Capenna, we strike at her heart."

Atraxa's wings flap once. "This danger—is that why you sent Ajani to Theros, as well?"

"Astute of you," Norn says. "Yes. This danger cannot be permitted to triumph. You and Ajani will seal our victory."

"Then all is for the glory of the faithful," Atraxa says.



She leaves, then. Only Nissa remains—yet she is cold company. Norn's lieutenant is too preoccupied with managing the tree's growth to speak with her.

The air is not quite silent in the sanctum.

Norn hates it.

With a gesture, she calls for her attendants. They arrive to recite her own thoughts and teachings to her. In their screeching voices, Elesh Norn forgets her nightmares—and the woman who stalks them, cloaked in white.

# EPISODE II
# Holding Your Breath

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THE PLANESWALKERS HEAR OF THE STRIKE TEAM'S FATE.
CONTINGENCY PLANS ARE PUT INTO MOTION.

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Chandra hates waiting.

She hates everything about this: the safe house they're all cooped up inside; the daily check-ins from other walkers waiting to hear the worst; the excruciating agony of knowing a blow is coming but not knowing when or where it will strike. For the past week they haven't been living in any real sense of the word.

They've been waiting.

That's the plan, after all. For two weeks they'll wait here in one of Liliana's cabins on Dominaria. Though she swore these were simple placeholders for the soon-to-be reconstructed Vess Manor, they were crawling with the sort of wards that'd make a demon think twice . Chandra had no idea Liliana even knew so many wards. When pressed, Liliana simply said she'd learned to protect her investments.

At the end of these two weeks if they've not gotten any word, then they're to assume everyone's died and proceed accordingly. If they get news before then—well, they'll act according to the news. If it's good they'll spread the word to the others that there's nothing to worry about.

And if it isn't good, they'll tell the others to get ready for war.

Some take the waiting better than others—better than she does. Vivien's out more often than she's in, which gives everyone a little breathing room. Her cooking's incredible too. Wrenn's also usually out, but never too far away. Waiting's fine for her, so she claims, but Chandra knows she's getting listless. Wrenn might be a dryad—but there's a fire within her, too, and fire's always hungry for more.

And then there's Liliana, who hates waiting as much as Chandra does.

They don't really talk about it, because talking about it is like tearing open a wound, but it's something they've sensed about each other. When Chandra returns in the afternoons after her talks with Wrenn, Liliana's often got a story ready for her. Sometimes it's quiet company—she'll sit there reading some ancient tome or reviewing plans for the renovation while Chandra waits. How can she even focus on something like that right now? Everyone's trying to be normal, but nothing's normal, and no one wants to talk about it.



She never asks if there's news. And if someone arrives asking to hear some, it's usually Liliana who answers, sparing Chandra the trouble.

But every day it feels worse. It's like there's a knife against her skin and every day someone drags it a little further along. Every drop of blood is a thing she hasn't spoken out loud, a thought she's too afraid to think.

Phyrexian weaponry. Black oil. Ajani and Tamiyo, lost to them forever, so different from the people they'd been only a few months ago. A plane full of people like that—people who'd do that to others. Maybe it's wrong to think of them as people at all.

She wants to strike back. At least if she was in the thick of it she'd know what was going on, even if the answers weren't good. Lately none of the answers have been good. If Nissa was...

More than anything, she wants the waiting to be over.

For now, she'll pass the time with Wrenn.

"You have to focus on your breathing. Fire needs air just like we do," Chandra says. Jaya used to tell her that to calm her down when things got bad: if she could control her breathing then she could control her fire, and if she controlled her fire, everything would be all right.

Jaya's dead, Ajani killed her, and Chandra's not sure if anything is going to be all right again. But she has to hope that it will be. Wrenn's not

great at breathing. Chandra doesn't hold it against her—she's a dryad, after all. Most of them don't have lungs.

"Comparisons to human breathing are a little hard to grasp," Wrenn says. Flames lick up between her barky skin. In spite of the pain she must be in, she sounds cheerful.

"Right," Chandra says. She scratches at the back of her head. Nissa spoke tree. She probably had tons of dryad friends, even. She'd know what to say—but she isn't here. "Think of it like... the fire's something you have to shape. You've got to find the parts of it that aren't helpful and cut them off."

"Better," Wrenn says. The fire does flicker—but it doesn't retreat as much as Chandra wanted.

She sets a hand on Wrenn's shoulder, feeling like it's the mentorly thing to do, but without much of an idea how to mentor. Jaya left her with so many lessons. Chandra's not sure she's internalized all of them. How can she pass all of that on to Wrenn? Somebody else would be better at this, someone older, someone...

...Someone like Ajani.

Chandra extinguishes the thought.



"Let's do it together," she says. "I'll be right here with you. Some fires aren't worth the air; the trick is knowing which ones."

"All right," Wrenn says. "Although that seems terribly rude to the fire."

Chandra closes her eyes. She takes a breath. In the back of her mind she can hear Jaya's steady voice telling her to focus on the feeling of the air through her nostrils. She repeats the words, clumsy and inelegant, as they come to her. *You have to talk to the fire. Find out what it wants to do.*

And then the brash war-horn boom of Tyvar's arrival falls like an axe between them.

The two of them look over toward the safe house in time to see two figures limp through the door. Chandra's breath stops in her throat.

There are no more words between her and Wrenn; there's no need for them. Chandra makes for the safe house, shooting a flare into the murky gray sky and hoping it'll be enough to catch Vivien's attention.

And for all that she hates waiting, Chandra finds herself hesitating at the threshold.

Only three of them came back. Maybe the first three, maybe not. But which three would they be? She runs through the possibilities in her head, and she hates herself for doing it. News is good to have, whatever it might be. But who waited beyond the door?

She's never going to find out if she stays out here.

Chandra takes a breath. She steps into the safe house with her eyes closed.

"….We were right about the tree. They have their own. It's corrupted, twisted—"

"They out-planned us. Had an answer for everything—"

"—Shaping reality to whatever they want--"

Three voices. None Nissa's. Another cut.

Chandra swallows. There's other stuff to think about—this plan's bigger than any of them as individuals. Kaito, mostly whole, leans against a bust. Kaya and Tyvar are slumped on a couch when she opens her eyes, both covered in blood and dirt and grease. Liliana, of all people, is attending to the injured—there are small vials of liquid laid out before her on the floor. She pours some onto a cloth before dabbing it against one of Tyvar's wounds.

It's Liliana who notices Chandra walking in. "It isn't good news."

"Didn't feel like it was," Chandra says "Never seen anything fouler," Tyvar says. A haunted look comes over him. "The World Tree essence they stole from Kaldheim, they used it to make a monstrosity. It isn't even alive."





*"Breach the Multiverse", by Liiga Smilshkalne.*

"They're using it to invade the other planes." Kaya can't stand sitting anymore—she's up and pacing. "Moving whole armies. Weapons like we've never seen before. There's almost no one left on New Phyrexia but those machine nightmares. Soon they're going to be everywhere."

"But we've still got people to fight back, don't we? We can get everyone else from the other planes, round them up, crash back to New Phyrexia and take Norn down," Chandra's babbling, and she knows it, but she can't

stop. Air, she thinks, air—just keep breathing. All of this is worth the air. "This isn't over. It can't be."

There's sympathy in Kaya's eyes. "No, we can't."

"Maybe we should wait for Vivien before we go into it," Kaito cuts in.

Chandra doesn't like that at all. "We've done enough of that. How are they controlling it?"

"I'm just saying—" Kaya starts, as gentle as she can be.

"Kaya. Please," Chandra says. It surprises her, how pained she sounds. "Tell me what happened."

Kaya swallows. "They got Nissa."

And just like that, Chandra forgets how to breathe. She sputters. She knew. On some level, she knew, when Nissa wasn't with the group, that…

Before she can summon something to say, the door opens behind them.

"There's news?" Vivien says from behind them. "Wait… Where's Jace?"

"Fashionably late, I imagine," Liliana says. She ties off the bandage around Tyvar's chest. "He'll be here any moment now."

Kaya closes her eyes. "No. He won't."



Liliana's face, at least, shows no signs of distress. Her voice comes sharp and hurt—the same hurt in Chandra's chest. "Don't be ridiculous."

"He fought valiantly, but these beasts. . ." says Tyvar.

"Bravery doesn't matter much when your opponent never tires, never errs," Kaito says. He can't seem to look up from the floor. "Or when you're that far gone."

"That doesn't make any sense," Liliana says. She stands, picking up a tray of vials to hide her trembling hands. "All of this nonsense was his idea. He wouldn't just fail. He doesn't do that."

"At the end, I don't think it was him anymore. He became one of them," Kaito says.

Liliana's taking deeper breaths, but she doesn't want anyone to notice. "What do you mean?"

"We don't have time to get caught up in the details," Vivien interjects. "Whatever happened, Nahiri's going to Zendikar, the Wanderer must have gotten away, Elspeth must have already gone ahead to Theros—" "We saw the Phyrexians take Nahiri, too," Tyvar says.

"Elspeth didn't make it," Kaito adds. "The Wanderer's probably headed back home, but there's no way Elspeth made it out of that."

"There is no way Elspeth Tirel died on New Phyrexia," says Vivien.

Kaya's brows knit together. Her eyes flick over to Liliana. "Let's just get it out of the way: the last time we saw Elspeth, her sword was jutting out of Jace's back." She pinches the bridge of her nose before continuing. "That messed up tree was already connected to a dozen planes at least. If he set off the Sylex, we could have lost them all. The thing was ticking away to the end of days, and there wasn't any time, so she..."

Kaya trails off. Tyvar picks it up again. "Elspeth ran him through, picked up the Sylex and planeswalked into the Blind Eternities. A noble sacrifice—she must be feasting with the valkyries now."

"Oh, shut up," hisses Liliana.

The air in the safe room's gone cold. Jace and Nissa are both gone. Nahiri, too. Even Elspeth couldn't make it out in the end. Out of everyone they sent, only four returned, and of the four only three are here. Everything they feared is coming true: the Phyrexian invasion is underway.

Vivien settles onto the floor with them, having lost her proud bearing in face of the news. "This is worse than I thought."



"That's the only reason we're here. You need to understand what we're up against." Kaya says. "The whole Multiverse has to understand. Now as I was saying—"

"Well, you can keep going without me." It's a sudden interjection, with an odd amount of force meant to detract from the wavering of its speaker. Liliana is already making for the door. "I'm going to send word to Strixhaven."

"You should hear the story—" starts Tyvar, but Liliana is already shaking her head.

"I've got a good enough idea of your kind of storytelling. Noble sacrifices never sit well with me."

Chandra opens her hand, then closes it into a fist. "What if there's a way we can help the others?"

Chandra's heard people say Liliana's all sharp edges and ambition. That's true. But it's also true that at certain angles, those give way. The tilt of Liliana's head now is anything but sharp; the ambition in her eyes has changed to a deep sympathy. "You want to go back there yourself, don't you?"

All eyes fall on Chandra. She's keenly aware of the way they're looking at her—what they must be thinking. *Of course she does. She's impulsive.* Chandra can hear the lectures starting, and she's already tired of them. She's tired of sitting around waiting for the world to end.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do," she says. "There must be some other way to take the World Tree down. You're all acting like it's over."

Kaya presses the heel of her palm against her eyes. She takes a breath. "I can't let you go back."

"*Let* me?" Chandra says. She takes a step toward her. "You aren't *letting* me do anything."

"The plan is to let the others know what's going on," Vivien says. She's cooler, more collected, but there's no mistaking what she thinks of Chandra's idea. "We can rally our forces, figure out some way to fight back. But we can't do that if we rush in headlong."

"There's plenty of you to go do that," Chandra argues. "Plenty of all of us. But if we keep fighting back against what's already there, we aren't going to make any progress. We have to cut them off at the root or they're going to keep coming."

The others exchange looks. At least they're thinking about it. Liliana, for all her earlier protestation, hasn't actually left yet—she remains halfway between Chandra and the door. She understands, doesn't she? She must understand better than anyone here what this feels like. It's Kaya who speaks up next. "Chandra, I understand where you're coming from. Truly, I do. But you can't begin to understand what happened in New Phyrexia. This isn't something you can just blow in and solve without planning



ahead. We planned for it, and we barely made it out. I've been an assassin for years, and I almost lost my head in there. Nahiri dealt with Eldrazi; we lost her, too. If you go there, you aren't just going to die—you're going to have your flesh stripped off, your bones shaped into metal, and your mind warped to their sick worldview. Next time we see you you'll be telling us about the joys of being one with Phyrexia. Vivien's right—the best thing we can do is try to avoid losing anyone else. Once we're done



*"Mountain", by Jorge Jacinto.*

here, you have to go home to Kaladesh and tell people how to prepare. That's the best we can do for them."

The answer's coming out of Chandra's mouth before her mind's had the chance to stop it. "You're treating me like a kid."

"I'm not treating you like a kid, I'm trying to look out for you. This isn't like Ravnica. The Eternals are nothing compared to Norn's fleshless legions. I know this is coming from a good place, you want to help everyone, you want to save the world—fine. But there are better ways to do it than running off half-cocked into a job a whole team of us couldn't finish."

Kaya's saying things, but all Chandra can hear is more of the same. Kaya doesn't see the point. Tyvar has to understand, right? He loves big challenges. But when she catches his eye, he averts his gaze.

"Valor's commendable," echoes Tyvar, "but so is knowing which battles are yours to fight. Kaya and I are only here to tell you what's happened. Go where you're needed, tend to your own, and die where your bones are home."

"This is *everyone's* battle," Chandra says.

"Which means everyone gets a say in it," says Vivien. "And my say is that we don't waste any more resources on something we know isn't going to work."



"I know how you're feeling. Admitting you've lost isn't easy," Kaito says. "But we only lost the fight. If we can keep our homes safe, we win the war."

Chandra takes a breath. She feels like she's going to explode. This is the most obvious thing in the world and they either can't, or won't, see it. "What about the people stuck on New Phyrexia? Are we just going to leave them there?"

No one wants to answer it. Not directly. The silence that comes over the safe house then is nothing but another form of waiting, and Chandra hates it as much as she hates this whole situation. If she could burn everything down right now—if she could find a new start in the flames—then she would. Standing here is making her soul itch.

"Tell me. Are we abandoning them?" Breathing's getting harder to do, or maybe easier—the breaths are big and sharp now, feeding the fire growing in the pit of her stomach. Heat sears the corners of her eyes.

"Chandra," Liliana says, soft as shadow on snow, "she'd want you to stay safe, wouldn't she?"

Why'd she have to say that? Chandra had been trying so hard not to think about it, trying to keep her imagination at bay, but Liliana's cut it loose. It's as easy to imagine Nissa here as it is to call fire. Chandra can see it so clearly: the determination written on Nissa's face, her eyes gone canopy green, the angle of her ears. She can feel Nissa's hand on her

shoulder, she can smell moss and pine, she can hear the words even if she doesn't want to imagine them.

It hurts.

Gods, it hurts.

She feels like she's bleeding out in front of every single one of them and not a one is offering her any help at all.

Chandra takes another breath. Air, she thinks. Just keep breathing.

"When we lose someone, we have to do honor to their memory," Liliana says.

"I haven't lost her," Chandra fires back.

Kaya's exasperation increases by the second. She's exhausted, and it's in every line of her face. "She's gone, Chandra."

"No, she isn't. If we stop the Phyrexians then we can figure out how to stop... how to stop whatever happened. How to make it better. You can't give up on—"

"This is about more than any one person," Vivien cuts in. "We're tending to a forest, here, not a single tree—"



"Don't you think I know that?" she says. The faint glow at the edge of her vision tells her she's flaring up. She didn't intend to, but it's fine—maybe even good. All this feeling has got to go somewhere. "Don't you think I know how many lives are the on the line? That's why I want to go back! We're never going to win if all we do is run away from them!"

"Chandra—" starts Kaya, but it's too late. She's beyond listening now.

"I'm leaving," she says. "You can go warn the other planes if you want to, but I'm not leaving our friends behind."

"You're going *alone*?" Tyvar asks.

"Since none of you are coming, yeah, I'm going alone," she says, backing toward the door. "But I won't be alone when I get there."

"And what's your plan, exactly?" Kaito calls.

Chandra doesn't turn. "Take down the tree. Figure everything else out along the way. Nice and easy."

The marsh awaits—with Liliana as the last of the group standing in her way. Still, Liliana isn't quite blocking her, only leaning against the threshold, watching.

"You're serious about this," she says.

"Yeah. And you're serious about running away, aren't you?"

There are plenty of people who would kill for the chance to make Liliana Vess wince. Strangely, it doesn't feel like a victory to Chandra. None of this does—and that's the worst part.

"Is that what you think I'm doing? I'm not running. I just know funeral bells when I hear them. I wish you all the best on your little adventure."

"Wait," Chandra says.

But Liliana doesn't. She walks out onto the marsh herself, hardly casting a backward glance. "Oh, there's no time for waiting. You said so yourself."

Nothing about today is easy. Chandra opens and closes her hand again. She wants to argue, or make it clear what she really meant—that Liliana would be a huge help if she came, and maybe they could find some answers together, and maybe it's good to face your fears instead of running from them.

But that'd be asking Liliana to be someone other than herself—and the two of them had always understood not to ask that of each other.

Liliana disappears in a blink of inky vapor.

Chandra Nalaar gets to walking.

The tears are hot when they leave her eyes, but the cold air of the marsh threatens to freeze them against her skin. She turns up the heat to keep from shivering. She doesn't know how far she wants to go before she planeswalks away. Really, she doesn't have to go far at all. She could do it here if she wanted to.

But she wants to walk for a while. Feel the wind, smell the awful marsh smell, look up at the dull gray sky. When she leaves, she may not see sky again for some time. It isn't the vibrant azure of Kaladesh. The clouds here don't spiral. In fact, there aren't any clouds at all—only a morass of gray in all directions. She can't smell ozone or stall food; she can't hear the din of the markets. This place is not home. This place is not what she will remember.

That's fine. She'll come back. There will be other places. She'll make sure of it, because when the World Tree comes down, they're going to have so many other places to go. It'll be fine, after.

She stops at the first tree she sees. It isn't a very strong tree, or even very healthy: its bark has gone black, its branches empty and gnarled like claws raking against the sky. But it is a tree, and she thinks that's probably good enough for taking a breath. Chandra sits beneath its nonexistent shade and throws her head back.

Going to New Phyrexia is the right thing to do.

But she is afraid.

It'll be fine. She just needs a second to build up to it.

And maybe a second to cry before she planeswalks right into the mouth of an evil empire defended by the people who were once her closest friends. People she'd depended on to take that empire down. They couldn't do it—and now she's going off to do it alone.

A sudden coolness and the shifting of leaves tell her that she's not alone. Sniffling, Chandra frowns. "Go away."

"Oh, I'd rather not. Then I'd have to return to the others."

Ah, it's Wrenn. At least it isn't Kaya coming to try and talk her out of this. Still, Chandra can't think of anything to say. She tries not to sob as much now that she's got company—but she sobs all the same.

"I want to help."

Chandra wipes at the tip of her nose. "You do?"

"I do. How strange it was to watch you speak with the others. I thought you were making perfect sense. If a branch has gone rotten, you've got to cut it off before you can assess how the tree's doing."

She didn't know what a relief it would be to have someone understand her. Before, it felt like her anger was steaming out of her—but it's different now. Like it's melting out into the ground. Still, she has to be sure Wrenn means what she's saying. "We won't have any backup."

"Don't speak so surely," Wrenn says. "We have Seven with us—and I think we'll have Teferi, too."

Teferi? But nobody knew where he was, or if he was even still alive.

"You're confused about that, aren't you? I think that's confusion on your face. It can be hard to tell sometimes, what people are thinking, just with their faces."

"You guessed right," Chandra says. "You should give yourself more credit. If we had Teferi with us... You think you know where to find him?"

"I think so," Wrenn says. She nods, while Seven assumes a thinking posture. "He's gotten himself caught in a tangle again—but it's nothing we can't solve. I've been studying it while we've been in this place, the twisting paths he's gone down. I know how to reach him, but I won't be able to do it on my own."

"Well, you won't be on your own," Chandra says. The fear's leaving, too, as hope begins to rear its head. If she can get Teferi out from wherever he is, their odds improve considerably. "You'll have me, Seven, and whoever else we find over there."

But Wrenn looks away, her hand resting on Seven's bark. "Seven has done so much for me—but he cannot do this. He cannot lend me power he doesn't have. It must be the fire, and it must be the World Tree."

The most important thing about dealing with fire, Jaya had always said, is knowing that it's dealing with you. You can guide it, you can make suggestions, you can give it a safe place to be—but in the end it's always going to do what it wants, and what it wants changes from second to second. You have to be in conversation with it if you mean to get anywhere, and if you want to keep your friends safe. It's the exact opposite of dealing with trees.

Chandra used to talk with Nissa about it, too.

Nissa used to tell her that sometimes turbulent growth, the sort that happened all at once, could be like fire. At first, Chandra hadn't believed her. Fire scours, nature nurtures. But then she saw what the Roil was like on Zendikar and it started to make sense—sometimes, it was the same. She liked it when nature surprised her. And, more than anything, she liked listening to Nissa talk about it.

She'd tried to help Wrenn figure things out the way Nissa had helped her, but teaching's a lot harder than listening, and Wrenn's fire isn't any normal flame. That she's standing there at all is a testament to her strength.





*"Realmbreaker, the Invasion Tree", by Kekai Kotaki.*

If she's really going to set it loose, then the World Tree just might be the only thing that can handle it. "You're sure?"

"I am," she says. "The others were wrong—that tree is alive. I can hear his song from here. It's... distant, but pained. A howl without melody. He needs help, just as Teferi and the others do. If I were to ignore it, what sort of hero would I be? My own fright has little to do with it."

Chandra offers a small, sad smile. “Hero, huh? I’m frightened too—but less, now that I’ve got company.”

“You should find yourself a friend like Seven,” Wrenn says. “You’d never be lonely, then.”

Unless that friend should happen to be lost on a plane full of vicious enemies, and then she’d be very lonely indeed.

Chandra’s smile only gets sadder—but she stretches it out, as if to hide it. She gives Seven a pat on the bark. “Let’s head out.”

Wrenn tilts her head, as if realizing she might have said something amiss, but the moment passes without comment. Soon they have left the shade of the barren tree. No one comes to see them off.

Not anyone they can see, at any rate.

But there is someone watching the clearing. There is someone watching the safe house, and the people within it huddled together in search of purpose and direction. A trick of the light might reveal them, or it might not. A keen nose might notice their scent, or it might not. But they are there, watching.

All of this feels familiar to them, like a song whose lyrics have long since faded away. Over and over they try and remember and yet the



words flit away. Only the melody remains: a lament for what is to come, a dolorous anthem.

The watcher is not alone. There are others, too, seeing and yet unseen. The watcher asks one of them: “What is it we’re seeing? Why are we here?”

The answer comes like the trumpet of war horns: *We are here to witness the beginning of the end.*

# EPISODE III
# Mother, Son, and Story

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TAMIYO RETURNS TO KAMIGAWA.
KAYA AND KAITO JOIN FORCES TO DEFEND IT.

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There is a story.

*Many eons ago there was a great wizard by the name of Urza. So wise was he that all of the mages of the Multiverse flocked to him for advice; so powerful was he that only his brother Mishra stood as a potential rival. But Mishra hated him bitterly, and soon a war began.*

*The war spanned decades and took untold lives. Worse, it allowed evil without compare to blossom. An awful affliction spread through Mishra's armies—a black oil that changed everything in its path.*

Tamiyo knows this story. This is only the way it starts; there is more, much more. Years ago she memorized every word. Afterward, just as Urza's metal heir had set himself upon the task of creating a world, she'd set herself the task of recording it. Like the oil, she'd found the story had

seeped into her mind, begun to change it into something she did not like. Something dangerous.

She'd sealed it away.

What a foolish thing to have done.

Hovering over the neon skies of Towashi, she holds the scroll in hand. Oil seeps from her fingers onto the parchment. Before long it will be impossible to read any of the characters—but that is no worry for someone like her, someone who knows these stories better than she knows her own.

A Phyrexian centurion bashes in the roof of a building. People scatter from it like ants. No—not like ants, whose carapaces lend them strength, who act as one in all things. People could never be so reliable when trapped by flesh and mortal fear. No, as they pour out from the building screaming, it is only the visceral that drives them, the corporeal—the falsest parts of their existence.

There is an iron ring binding the scroll. Tamiyo slips it off. It plummets through the air, landing like so many other hunks of metal upon someone's unsuspecting crown.

The story continues.

*The wizard Urza creates an heir from pure, unvarnished metal. He names him Karn. The same spark of creation that birthed him burns brightly in his breast. Karn, too, must create. As a sculptor chipping at marble he shapes his world. When it is done—the creatures named and granted boons, the climate carefully crafted, the earth shaped and polished—he appoints his own successor, Memnarch, to oversee it.*



The spirits of Towashi do not take kindly to her intrusion, nor the intrusion of her fellows. Boughs bend, steam sears sinew, leaves slice like razorblades. Other stories serve to protect her. Lesser stories. Stories without purpose, stories that do not extol the glories and virtues she now



*"Corruption of Towashi", by Artur Nakhodkin.*

sees so clearly. Every history, every tale, every fable that exists is either for unity or against it.

She can shed those histories that no longer matter. This one does; she must bring it to its conclusion.

As her eyes scan the scroll, the characters light up—even those now consumed with black oil. Each syllable she reads booms and reverberates, shaking the skyscrapers of Towashi. Trains careen off their crumbling tracks and dive to the ground. The earth tears itself apart, opening crevasses in the city that has space only for itself. Rivers pour in, taking boats and fishers along with them. Streaks of black color the water. Phyrexian symbols etch themselves onto the papers hanging on the buildings yet standing.

It won't be long now. The story continues.

*Memnarch, the heir's heir, is a copy of a copy—a faded image of Urza himself. It longs for the power its grandfather wielded as easily as a poet wields a brush. It longs for its parents' ability to create. It longs to see more. Over years it plucks life from this plane and that, settling them all within this garden, waiting for the flowers to come. And they do, but they aren't the flowers Memnarch expects: these bloom in black oil. Their choking roots wrap around that which is alive and whole. Soon, the whole garden drowns beneath the oil. The Heir returns to discover his home has been torn asunder.*



There is more to the story. There are the people driven from their home and trampled underfoot, their souls shucked from their bodies, their bodies altered beyond any recognition. A queen rising up from among the muck to rule her people. A glorious, unending oneness—a life without war or conflict. The heir looks on all this with horror.

When Tamiyo wrote the story, she feared all of this. She didn't understand the peace that came with being part of a greater family. This is not the way she'd tell this story now. But it is almost done, and she will continue telling it.

Boseiju, the tree that once held this world together, bursts apart. Like wine spilling from a cask, oil runs from between the splinters, dripping onto the thirsty earth. An unholy screech pierces the ears of all who will listen: kami, torn from their home, scatter out of the district. Some find their ends at the tip of a lance, some find them torn apart by compleated fishers joined with their catches, but the end result is always the same: the kami dissolve into a fine mist. Tendrils of smoke rise from the blackening soil, from the bridges dissolving into nothing, until the whole district is swallowed by the fog of dead kami.

There is a distant part within her that is screaming at the sight of all this. A small voice ringing in her ear, a tingling at her fingertips. But she cannot say she is afraid. This is what is right for Kamigawa. After centuries of war, have they not earned peace? Is this not simply another step to become whole?

The scroll itself becomes oil in Tamiyo's hands, dripping between her fingers.

This is how the story ends, and how it has always ended: with Phyrexia's victory.

...

A scab turns into a scar when you pick at it too much. A wound scars when it doesn't receive proper care.

Kamigawa's bleeding. Ravnica is, too. But Ravnica's got plenty of walkers to keep it safe. That's Teyo's whole thing, to start—and Ral's been dreaming up countermeasures for a while now. Said he had a hunch something big was coming. They can handle things there for a while, at least.

Kaya and Vraska were supposed to hold Ravnica down while Jace co-ordinated with the other planes. That wasn't going to happen now.



They'd manage without them. Kaito asked her for help stanching the bleeding on Kamigawa, and after what they'd been through, helping out is the least she can do.

Even if she's got her own wounds to worry about.

Kaya's not sure how long hers will hang around. Are these the sort of memories that change who you are in the afterlife? If so, she's hopelessly lost. Seeing New Phyrexia was bad enough. But being in the middle of an invasion—watching New Phyrexia tear a plane limb from limb? The only way to keep from hurting is to let herself go numb to the sights.

There's too much going on to save everyone: the ground rattles with the cratering footfalls of centurions. Snarling machine hounds roam the streets, some with people caught inside their lattice of bone. Centuries of history evaporate in an instant—hundreds of potential futures are snuffed out all at once.

There's no time for thinking about it, no time for bitterness over how this all happened or why she's the one who has to pull the Gatewatch together, no time for wondering what might go wrong. People are falling. No time to reconcile with the way her stomach twists after a planeswalk either—there's only moving, only doing.

She must act.

Kaya runs. One leap takes her onto a balcony as it splits off; another sees her landing on the teetering floor beyond. Horror sets in a second later: the houseplants, scattered clothing, and ruined kitchen give breath to her worst fears. This was a residential building. Hopefully most of the inhabitants escaped. A half-finished bowl of noodles at least says the people in this unit did. But there are others, aren't there?

A scream catches her ear, muffled by the ongoing chaos. Kaya phases through the wall, with its knickknacks and mementos, trying not to think about how all of those things will be lost after today. A young boy and his dog quiver in the corner on the other side. Fallen supports have trapped the two of them in place. There's space enough for the dog to squeeze through, but the boy would have far more trouble.

Kaya can't leave them here. She doesn't have much of an exit plan, doesn't know exactly how they're all going to make it out, but she can figure it out along the way. After all, it can't be harder than figuring out what to do about this invasion.

Phasing through the fallen supports is easy enough. Normally, phasing the boy out of his position would be hard—but it's easier when he wants out just as much as she wants to help him. She offers him a hand. When he takes it, she pulls him through the fallen beam. The boy grins—and the dog squeezes through after them.



"How're we getting down?" he asks.

A fair question, given the sight in front of him: the whole side of the building's been torn off. Towashi looms—or what remains of it. Floors and furniture tumble to the ground as smoke rises from the earth, an acrid, oily smoke Kaya doesn't want to think about too closely. The streets are packed with those fighting against the invasion and those furthering it. Black oil seeps from the mouths and eyes of the attackers and foul Phyrexian symbols glow on every surface. Worse—every few minutes a



*"Sunder the Gateway", by Titus Lunter.*

thundering boom shakes the plane once more, heralding the attack of Norn's skeletal, glowing branches.

If Kaya was a kid watching all this she'd ask the same question.

But she's an adult now. Her job is to find answers where there are none.

"We're gonna jump from one place to the next," she says. The boy tucks his dog inside of his shirt. "Are you good at jumping?"

"The best," says the boy.

She hopes he is. She takes his hand, the two of them approaching the lip of the remaining floor. Up ahead there's the swinging remains of a balcony—if they can get onto that, then maybe they can shimmy down a rain pipe to safety.

"On three," she says. He nods.

One, two...

Three!

The two of them jump at the same time, Kaya keeping the boy's hand in her own. But just as they should be landing, the balcony falls away.

Kaya, the boy, and the dog plummet.



You have a lot of thoughts when you think you're going to die. Fewer when you're responsible for saving someone else. Kaya thinks fast. She *might* be able to save the boy if she can slow down their flight. That's got to be the priority. As he starts to scream she clutches him to her chest.

She closes her eyes.

Impact never comes.

An unseen force pushes back up against them, slowing their fall. Seconds before they hit the ground they instead hover above it. Whatever's gripping them can't hold much longer; the two of them are trembling in its hold. A Phyrexian?

"Try to be less reckless next time."

Kaito.

Kaya opens her eyes to see him. His telekinesis is barely holding them up; sweat beads on his forehead. Handling a human-sized object, let alone three, must be pushing his powers to their limit. Blood, oil, and dirt are spattered across his slick armor. He gives her a nod.

The boy acts first, hopping out onto the ground. A woman nearby shouts for him—he runs without a second look back. A woof from his shirt tells her the dog's okay, too.

Kaya gets up. She flicks the tip of her nose with her thumb. “Thanks,” she says. “Would have been lost without you.”

He lets that stand without correction, which she supposes is fair enough.

“We have to move fast. The Boseiju district is their prime target. The whole thing, the tree...”

Kaito trails off, but Kaya can find her own answers. The tree over Towashi is rent asunder. A foul waterfall pours from its body.

“That’s... that’s awful,” Kaya says.

“It is,” Kaito nods. “And worse, Tamiyo did it. Opened up a scroll. You can see her.” Kaito points toward Tamiyo, floating high above the city, near Boseiju’s weeping boughs. “She’s still reading from them. If no one takes her out, this is only going to get worse.”

Hells—they’re talking about taking out friends now. Not that Kaya’s any stranger to assassination, but there’s something different about this. Tamiyo of all people. “We’ve both got the skills for this. Should I do it, or do you want to handle her?”

“It’s personal,” Kaito says with a nod. “The kami are going to want to fight this as much as we do—the ones who can fight. See if you can convince them to come.”



“Speaking of help—where’s the Wanderer?”

Kaya didn’t mean it as a jab, but Kaito seems to take it as one. The corner of his lip twitches.

“She’s coming,” Kaito says.

“You mean she isn’t here?”

“She’ll be here,” he says. “Just have a little faith.”

All around them Kamigawa is crumbling. He says have faith. It’s like a bad joke, isn’t it?

Or a scab they keep picking at.

...

Tamiyo floats above them. Or something that once was Tamiyo. She doesn’t look down on them, doesn’t seem to move, doesn’t seem to care about what she’s doing. Nothing could be further from the woman Kaito met in Otawara.

He sizes up the oil-slick bark of the tree. No matter what he’d thought of her before, this is about more than just him. Kaito sets his foot against the bark. He gets about three steps up before someone calls to him.

“A-are you going up there to fight her?”

The voice is small and timid. And as much as he'd like to ignore it, he knows he can't. Besides, if there's a kid hanging around this place they need to scatter, and fast. "I am. You should get going."

"I can't," says the voice. When he looks down, he catches sight of the kid: a little Nezumi in motley metal armor and a home-made helmet that obscures his face. He must have cobbled it together out of scraps. Wait a second... "That's my mom up there."

"Nashi?" he asks.

Sure enough, he nods.

Kaito lets himself down from the tree. "You don't want to be here," he says. "Things are going to get bad."

"But you're not going to hurt her, are you?" Nashi asks, fussing his hands . "She looks different, but that's still her. I think she's forgotten herself—I thought, maybe if I talked to her..."

Kaito runs a hand through his hair. "I don't think it's that simple."

"You have to let me try," Nashi says. He draws himself up to his full height—which isn't very tall. "I came all the way out here to help when I heard things were getting bad. Mom said that's what heroes do. If you can bring me up somewhere she can see me, then I'm sure she'll listen. No matter who she is, she'll always love me. She promised."



Kaito's chest goes tight. He doesn't want to do this. But if it was Eiko up there? Kaito doesn't want to think about the possibility, yet he knows he'd do anything he could to get her back. Even if getting her back didn't seem like an option. Tamiyo ended up this way because of him. The least he can do is try this plan.

"All right," Kaito says. "How's your climbing?"

"Okay," Nashi says. "Not good enough when there's all this… stuff on the tree. It didn't seem like I should touch it."

"You shouldn't," Kaito says. He takes a repulsor from his belt Nashi couldn't weigh much, right? Kaito clips it to Nashi's sash and turns it on. A soft hum radiates as he starts to float. "Walk in the direction you want to go. It's a little slow, but you'll be able to follow along. If you hit the button one more time, it'll shield you. Don't hit it after that, unless you want to drop."

Nashi nods.

Kaito swallows, shaking away the sense of dread. If worst came to worst he'd tell Nashi to leave. But maybe he's right, maybe there is a way to break through all this. Stranger things have happened. They need to try.

Boseiju doesn't make itself easy to climb. Between the torrents of oil raining down above them and the chaos behind, there isn't much in the

way of mercy. Normally there were branches lower to the ground upon which some of the kami dwelled—but all those have split apart. The first branch that suits them is far higher up, and only half-stable at that. The air is cold and thin when they at last alight upon it; if it weren't for his training, Kaito would be dizzy.

Nashi isn't so lucky. When his paws meet the bark he sways from one to the other, clutching at his stomach. Kaito sets a hand on his shoulder. He points ahead, to where Tamiyo still hovers. "Take a second if you need it, but she's there. Hasn't noticed us, either."

Nashi takes two steadying breaths. Kaito breathes along with him; sometimes it helped to have company when it came to that sort of thing.

"Okay. I'm ready," Nashi says.

Kaito hopes he is. Just in case things go wrong, he unsheathes his sword. "I've got your back."

Step by unsteady step, Nashi makes his way to the end of the branch. Kaito follows a pace or two behind. His heart hammers in his ears. Something in Tamiyo had to remain. Something in her would remember, right?

"Mom?"

Tamiyo's head swivels all the way around her neck. The eyes that behold them are not the kind, inquisitive eyes Kaito once knew. They're



something else entirely—rimmed with black, the tears on her cheeks a testament to what she's become.

Tamiyo says nothing. Around her the scrolls swirl; the light catches the sharp edges of her claws.

"It's me, Nashi. You remember me, right?" he asks. "I-I don't think you want to do any of this. I think you've made a mistake. But I know someone's making you. I just want you t-to remember. Like in the stories about lost princes." Nashi trembles so hard that it is difficult for him to speak.

"Nashi," says Tamiyo. "What are you doing here. . .?"

Kaito reaches out to steady the small Nezumi.

And it is then that the rest of Tamiyo's body snaps around to match her head, then that her face wrenches into a scowl. A shard of metal shoots toward them, flung from the orbit of scrolls floating around Tamiyo. It is only Kaito's time-honed instincts that save him: he deflects the shards with telekinesis the way he'd deflected all the stones his instructors flung at him. The clang of metal rings in his ears.

"I want nothing more than for you to join me, Nashi," says Tamiyo. Her voice rings wrong to Kaito— like a twisted cicada's cry. "You're only afraid because you don't understand. There is nothing to fear. In the light of New Phyrexia, all are one."

Kaito steps in front of Nashi. “Go back toward the tree.”

“I can’t leave her—”

“This isn’t your mother,” Kaito snaps. “Now go!” Kaito gives Nashi a push further back. If things are going to get violent, there’s no way he wants Nashi to see it.

No sooner than Kaito shoves Nashi away does Tamiyo descend on him. Tamiyo was someone who did what she could to support others. A storyteller, an investigator, a woman devoted to her family. But now?

Phyrexia changed her. Warped that curious storyteller into a cruel hierophant. There was nothing behind those oil-weeping eyes.

Tamiyo’s claws sliced through the air, followed by weaponized scrolls that grab at Kaito’s neck and arms, threatening to bind and overwhelm him. Kaito slices through the paper while keeping the metal at bay—but his footing on this slick branch is treacherous. He slips. Tamiyo’s claws skitter and spark off of Kaito’s armor before he manages to recover. The slightest skid of his feet and those claws will find a home across his neck. He manages to recover his balance with only a tear across his armor to show for it.

Kaito holds his sword out before him.

Tamiyo stares back at him unblinking. “This is a pointless fight.”



“Maybe for you,” Kaito says. “There’s no way you’re going to win this.”

Without even a gesture Tamiyo sends five more shards flying toward him; Kaito blocks four. The fifth slices him across the cheek.

“I pity you,” Tamiyo says. “Fighting against peace to maintain your loneliness. You stand in the way of your own enlightenment. Like a child, you fight against the parents who only wish to welcome you.”

Hearing her like this tears him up. Kaito hopes Nashi can’t hear her. And he hopes, too, that Nashi isn’t watching when he throws his weight into a lunge. Tamiyo sways back and counters—a scroll wraps around his leg. He tries to shift his weight and cut himself loose.

Tamiyo pulls.

Kaito flips feet over head before he knows what’s happened, dangling far above Towashi. The smoke of the burning city stings at his eyes. Somehow, he keeps hold of his sword.

“I’m giving you one final opportunity to surrender, Kaito. Phyrexia can give you the life you’ve always wanted. Come home. And let me welcome my family.”

Blood’s rushing to his head. Think. If he cuts himself down, he’s going to fall. Maybe he’ll be able to catch himself on something; maybe not. But he doesn’t have many better options.

"I like my life the way it is," he says.

Kaito makes the cut.

He falls. Impact never comes. Instead, he feels something cool and soft beneath him. Something... familiar. "We're up to three, if you're keeping count."

That voice. A smirk comes to him before his eyes are open—it's the Emperor. She lands atop the branch in a hush of cloth, her sword held out at her side. Which means he must have landed on Kyodai—the guardian spirit of Kamigawa whose soul is bound to the Emperor.

"Call it even with me?" Kaya's voice tells Kaito he isn't alone. She's right next to him, the two of them riding together.

"For now," Kaito says. "I told you she'd be here."

Kyodai swoops back up toward Tamiyo. They're level with the branch, now. His eyes are trained on the Emperor as she confronts Tamiyo. Each step is cautious and graceful—the slickness that troubled Kaito isn't a concern for the Emperor. What jocularity there was in her initial greeting is gone when she addresses the monstrosity before her.

"Is this truly the place for a fight, Tamiyo?" the Emperor asks.

"You should be asking yourself that," Tamiyo responds.



A flurry of shards fly out toward her, each split in two by a single cut of the Emperor's blade. Tamiyo backs away with each step the Emperor takes toward her—stopping right beside a frightened Nashi.

Tamiyo's hand settles on Nashi's head.

Kaito's stomach twists. He wonders if he should look away. Instead, he finds the strength to call out. "Nashi, turn around!"

Tamiyo reaches for a scroll at her waist, one bound with an iron band. She slips the band free with a finger. The silken paper unfurls.

"Kyodai!" the Emperor shouts.

The great kami beneath them flies to her side. The Emperor holds her sword toward her companion and Kyodai breathes upon it. Shining white lines the blade; characters float in the air around her. Kyodai's power flows through the Emperor.

Tamiyo's mouth begins to move.

Nashi, at last comprehending what is about to happen, turns away.

A flash of white light, the sound of a blade unsheathing, the whistle of a distant gale.

Tamiyo falls.



*"Cut Short", by Tran Nguyen.*



Kaito is on his feet in an instant. Nashi is all alone up there now—he's going to need company. By the time Kaito has closed the distance, the Wanderer is there to meet them. Kaito hugs Nashi tight.

"That wasn't her," Nashi repeats. "That wasn't—Why was she like—Why didn't she...?"

There aren't any easy answers—certainly none Kaito can summon. A stone in his throat keeps him from speaking.

The Emperor bows her head with grief. "Your mother will live on in your memory, and the stories you tell of her."

It is wise counsel, but not necessarily comforting to someone in the thick of pain. Nashi's sobs only get louder. Kaito can't blame him.

Another hand alights on his shoulder, oddly light and cold. Kaya never seemed the type for tearful reunions, but maybe after what they saw on New Phyrexia she's singing a different tune. Any comfort is welcome now. Even Kyodai wraps around them all. For a moment it feels as if they're trying to hold the world together. Perhaps in the case of this one young boy, they are.

Peace lasts until they hear Nashi's mother calling for him.

Tamiyo's voice does not drift up from the pile of metal the Emperor struck down, but from right among them. This wasn't the cold Phyrexian whisper but the warm, familiar tones of her old self.

"Nashi, I'm sorry."

Kaito shields Nashi with his body. Before them is a strange being: densely packed floating characters form a woman's silhouette. They glow and dim as if breathing. When they next hear Tamiyo's voice, a light at the center glows even brighter. Characters wink in and out of existence and change as he studies them. Towashi's projected neons can achieve all sorts of trickery, but this is something different. The way it's moving feels too intentional to be random, too imperfect to be artificial. The light glowing within reminds him more of a kami than any of Towashi's technical wonders.

"I understand you might be wary of me, but I mean you no harm," Tamiyo says.

"What are you?" Kaito asks.

"Not a ghost, that's for sure," Kaya calls—she's at the edge of the branch. "What do you want?"

The silhouette turns toward each of them, then nods. "I am what remains of Tamiyo—her story unending. You may think of me as her memory. Many years ago she created me in anticipation of her death and sealed me away within a scroll until I was needed, bound with an iron ring." Tamiyo's memory—her story—pauses. "I had hoped I might never be."



"How do we know you aren't—" Kaito starts.

But Nashi is already breaking away from him, toward the odd conglomeration of characters. When he meets them, they swarm, settling into his arms.

Kaito moves toward the boy, but the Emperor gestures for him to stop. The Emperor turns away—toward the body, toward Kamigawa, toward the ruins of the night. "She's telling the truth."

"How do you know?" Kaito asks. "How do you know this isn't another Phyrexian scheme?"

"Were you watching closely? Before I struck, Tamiyo mouthed something."

"I saw that, but she could have been doing anything. I thought she was preparing a curse."

"She wasn't," the Wanderer says. "All of the shards she threw at me went too wide to do any damage—didn't you notice?" She sets a hand on one of Kyodai's many masks, and the kami touches hers in turn. A hard-won moment of tenderness on a battlefield like this. "Tamiyo was making a request, in the only way she could."

Kaito looks back over his shoulder. Nashi is still surrounded by the characters—by the Story Unending. It isn't a clean victory, or even a very good one. Kaito looks out over the burning city below Boseiju's wounded canopy. So many are dead, so many are dying, so many more that will die.

In the distance he sees shapes moving through the strange smoke—giant mechs lumbering toward the impact barb. Imperial forces gathering to counter the Phyrexian assault.

How much can they do? How many can they save?

Tamiyo fell—but Nashi lived.

Considering the work left to do, he'll take it.

...

There is a story.

*Once upon a time there was a great evil, one that threatened to swallow the planes of the Multiverse whole. Unfeeling and uncaring, it infected the hearts of those it encountered.*

*There was someone who fought against it.*

*There was a protector in white.*

# EPISODE IV
# Beneath Eyes Unblinking

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FROM KALDHEIM, TO KALADESH, TO NEW CAPENNA—
THE MULTIVERSE FIGHTS BACK.

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To battle and bravery born, to battle and bravery Tyvar Kell returns—with boasts upon his lips, and black tidings in his heart.

Skemfar welcomes its wayward son with open arms. After the ozone-laden atmosphere of New Phyrexia and the acrid safe house swamp in Dominaria, it is a welcome thing to breathe good forest air into his lungs.

But the moment he arrives he knows he is too late. It is not to welcoming cheers he returns but to the clatter of swords against metal, the howl of arrows in flight and the screams of the pierced. In the distance, a sanguine ophidian the size of a mountain strangles the World Tree. White armor, glacier-thick, protects it. Pods fall—the shed scales of this foul serpent—and the ground trembles with every arrival, each one met with the hammer of war.

War drums beat in time with his own wild heart as he pushes his way into the melee. Glory drives his limbs. He ducks the scythe-like limb of an enemy, changes his own arm to metal, drives it through the thing's head. An instant later he's swaying out of the way of an axe as it takes out another. A cheer ringing out behind him gladdens his heart—the end of days has come to Kaldheim, and the elves of Skemfar meet it head-on.

Tyvar sees his brother fighting alongside his people, surrounded by skalds and banners.

"Here for the dregs?" Harald calls to him. "There'll be plenty."

"And more coming," Tyvar says. Something that was once a giant hurls a boulder toward them; the others scatter, but Tyvar plants his feet. From the earth he draws his strength—and with a single blow shatters the rock. He grins. "You must have been struggling before I returned."

Harald shakes his head. "Enough of that. Do you know anything that can help us? Who are these creatures?"

"Phyrexians," Tyvar answers. A scream takes his attention—one of the elves has found himself caught in the belly of a giant skeletal wolf. Tyvar winces. "See there—they'll bathe him in oil, and then he'll be more metal than elf. After that, the changes start. Won't be long before he'd tear off his own father's skin."



A dozen warriors meet the hound, two coming in on each side to flank. Hammers ring against steel.

"They won't stop until everything in Kaldheim's like they are. I've been to their home, brother—it is lifeless, without song." He swallows. The next part isn't easy to say, and yet it must be said: "This isn't an enemy the elves can vanquish alone."

The Cosmos itself reinforces his grim warning. The ground roars and shakes beneath their feet, white light leaking up from the opening crevices. Tyvar knocks against his brother. Harald steadies him, then points to the opening doomskar. "It seems we won't be alone for long."

Phyrexians and elves alike plummet into the hungry earth. Shifting lights render them silhouettes as the Cosmos claims them. Unsated, the light creeps higher and higher still—until at last torrents of water emerge. Tyvar scrambles, sinking to the ground, creating a platform for him and his people. His muscles strain under the force of his magic, shifting between rock and water, rock and water.

When he sees the first of the longboats cresting the water, Tyvar knows he's going to be at this for a while. Maybe longer than he can manage. If he fails, the elves will be washed away as surely as the Phyrexians. The lives of his people are in his hands.

He can't fail.

Tyvar Kell bellows a war cry. As his body battles the tides and the rock, he feels alive.

And while he's doing the simple thing, his brother handles what's more complicated. Omenseekers aboard the ships call out to the stranded elves, their captain leading, "It is the end of all things. Will the elves come and join the fight?"

"The elves will lead it!" is Harald's proud answer. "Onto the ships!"

Tyvar's shoulders tremble with effort and yet he holds fast to the earth. Each pair of fleeing feet shrinks the platform. Smaller and smaller, until only he and Harald remain on the rock.

He can hardly believe what he sees when he looks at the ships.

Dwarves and humans, ghostly fallen heroes, undead warriors, Karfell barbarians, fire giants wading through the seas, trolls beating war drums—has everyone on Kaldheim banded together? Tyvar can't recall seeing so many different faces in one place outside of a battlefield.

New Phyrexia planted the seeds of doubt and fear deep within him. The oil, and the changing of his newfound comrades, nurtured it. But this? This true unity?

This is an axe.



Harald climbs onto the ship first. He stretches out a hand toward Tyvar, who instead leaps onto the longship of his own accord. Beneath them the platform crumbles away into Skemfar's new river.

"Warriors!" Harald calls. The sigils and guides along the sides of the ship begin to glow. "Our grudges are ancient. A single battle shall not wipe clean the slate of old wrongs. When the morrow comes, all of us will once more be enemies!"

Tyvar's heart thrums in time with the beating drums, the sounding horns. Ships pick up speed. When Harald spoke even his most hated enemies waited to hear what he had to say. He does not know where they are going, but he knows that wherever they land, glory awaits.

White swallows them. For an instant, they enter the Cosmos, dazzling and infinite. Unearthly beasts lope alongside the boats—wolves, ravens, bears, even a squirrel.

"But that is only if we live to greet the morrow, my brothers and sisters-in-arms. Today, the valkyries will have their choice of heroes; today is a day the skalds shall sing of for centuries. Will your descendants name you a hero, or a coward?"

Light once more. Tyvar doesn't shut his eyes, no matter how the patterns sear at his irises.

When at last the light recedes, they find themselves above a churning ocean. Somehow, they're airborne—he leaves no time to question it, only lets it thrill his blood. Valkyries fly alongside them toward the sharp barbs of the Invasion tree, yet to find their home. Divine arrows streak light across the reddening sky. The World Tree looms, its foul mirror descending down, down, down. From here he can count every bump of its spine, every pod nestled within.



*"Invasion of Kaldheim", by Bryan Sola.*



There must be thousands. Tens of thousands, maybe, each with their own complement of soldiers, and each of those soldiers a fearsome foe. This was an enemy almost unstoppable: worse, those who died in defense of Kaldheim would rise, corrupted, to fight for the invaders who sought to destroy the land they once called home.

The odds, he knows, are not good.

"If Kaldheim survives, let it survive because we fought! If it dies, let it die a warrior's death, axe in hand, a boast on its lips, and mead in its belly!"

Beneath them the water bubbles. Just as the longboats erupt in a warrior's song, the seas too erupt.

The tattoos on Tyvar's shoulders tingle. All elves grew in the shadow of Koma. Ever changing, ever growing, quick as lightning and wily besides—is there any better creature to emulate than a serpent?

But that is not true of the serpent he sees now, the creature that rises from the depths of the sea. Sleek scales of metal, sharp bones along the ridges of its mouth, porcelain plating in place of eyes—whatever this creature once was, it is now unmistakably one of Elesh Norn's creations.

Already the eyeless monstrosity has snapped a longship between its jaws. Wood groans and warriors cry, tumbling great distances to their

deaths. From others, a hail of arrows, stones, thrown axes—whatever they might get ahold of.

All bounce off the creature's strange carapace.

Tyvar takes a step onto the boat's railing. In the flickering light of what might be Kaldheim's last war, the edge of his blade gleams bright.

Below him, the mouth of the serpent: within it, New Phyrexia, and all of his fears made manifest.

He doesn't like being afraid.

With the seething song of battle at his back and a cry from his chest, Tyvar leaps from the ship.

However the story of this day ends, the sagas will tell he was no coward.

...

Pia Nalaar has spent the last ten years of her life fighting for a better Kaladesh.

Most of that work's been undone in one day.

No—the truth is it's been a week, at least. Saheeli warned her then that something like this might happen, that something was going to happen. The clouds held proof, she'd said. In place of the swirls that so often dominated the skies of Kaladesh, she'd shown Pia the new shape that had come to dominate them.



"We have to be ready for an invasion," Saheeli had said.

"Chandra and the others have a handle on it."

She was so confident. So certain. She didn't want to believe that it could be otherwise. After all that had happened, after all of the struggles and wars—the Gatewatch must understand what needs doing. They must be able to handle it. Then one morning Pia spilled ink on her desk. When she grabbed a cloth to clean up the mess, the symbol—like an unblinking eye—stared back up at her in viscous black.

The memory was bad enough, but after the first spill she saw it everywhere she looked: in scrolls curled up on a shelf, in a plate of noodles she had not the stomach to finish, in trees and in currents of water.

Every day she awoke hoping that they'd fade, that she'd not see them, that Chandra would stroll back into her home for their monthly tea appointment with another story about how they'd snapped victory from the jaws of defeat.

But by the third day, she knew she had to act.

She and Saheeli addressed the consulate—but how could they convey the severity of what they knew? After Ghirapur had won its own freedom

and safety? Addressing this threat would stoke fear within the populace, and how could they be certain it was coming? The House of Knowledge had no records of any Phyrexians. Yet Saheeli and Pia were not raving madwomen, a fact the consulate knew well. If Pia allocated the resources to fight, then fight they would.

Even if some of them had no heart in it.

On the fourth day the sky darkened to a deep, rusty red.

For the past three days Saheeli'd been working on something she called "Operation Golden Scales," something she said would keep the streets safe. Most citizens in Ghirapur had been evacuated, leaving only essential personnel behind. Skyships armed themselves with powerful experimental weaponry. Ghirapur's workshops and factories had never worked so hard in such a short time—but it was for the best.

After all, if the enemy breached the Aetherflux Reservoir, there would no longer be a Ghirapur to defend.

So the artisans hadn't slept, and Pia hadn't either. She'd fallen asleep in the entryway of her own home. Getting to bed was just too much effort.

When at last the portals overhead opened, when the great spines of invasion descended from the holes they tore open in reality, when the



aether around them began to crackle dangerously against her skin—all of this was like letting out a breath.

It was here.

They were here.

The time for preparation was long behind them. All they could do was hope it had been enough.

Ghirapur's streets are clear—or as clear as they're ever going to get—as Pia leaves her home. Three buildings away, a pod obliterates a building's facade. Shattered glass, distant screams, weapons firing—the sounds are close to and yet altogether different from the sounds of revolution. There is no chanting here, there are no throaty slogans, no proud horns or resounding drums.

Only fear and desperation.

Skyships overhead fire their cannons at the invading branches and explosions paint the red sky gold. Shards of porcelain rain down upon the streets. She seeks cover beneath a statue's outstretched arms only to watch as the shards rend furrows down its sides.

Pia looks back up at the sky—at the ship that so readily advanced against the questing branch. She met its captain two days ago. He swore

that he'd do everything in his power to keep Ghirapur safe. A thousand and a half flights, he'd said, with no major losses to speak of.

She watches as the branch wraps around the ship, watches as its windows shatter as easily as those down the street, watches the oil slick its surface.

Pia closes her eyes. Her chest aches. A thousand thoughts fight to slip into her mind, but she walls them away. There's a rendezvous with Saheeli to get to.

Speaking of—looks like her operation's off to a good start. Deployment chambers spring up from hatches all along the street, and from those chambers emerge the fruits of Operation Golden Scales. Saheeli must have taken inspiration from some fantastic kind of lizard: the one lumbering in front of Pia is as big as the house that crumbled moments ago. The shining teeth along its jaws are each the size of Pia's forearm. When it stomps its feet, the stones beneath crack. And it is only one of many—all along the streets other bronze attack lizards spring up from the earth. Some are the size of small dogs, some take to the skies like 'thopters, but all roar their defiance at the coming Phyrexians.

And there are Phyrexians to deal with, even if the sight of these things is almost enough to distract Pia. From the broken house pour dozens of spindly porcelain soldiers—some of whom carry cages as big as they are.

The two forces are about to clash.



Pia doesn't want to be in the middle of it. She ducks under the bronze lizard's feet in time for a familiar face to pop up behind the Phyrexians. A cloud of 'thopters fly from Saheeli's cruiser. While the lizards descend upon the soldiers, the 'thopters conceal Pia's escape.

"Get in!" Saheeli shouts. And she's right to hurry—the soldiers don't take their duties lightly. Within minutes they've swarmed the largest of the lizards and taken it down. Oil seeps from its split mouths. It won't be long before the lizard rises against them, too.

Pia hops into the car. Saheeli's foot must be as leaden as the metal she's so fond of; the two of them jerk backward against the seats as the speed catches up to them. Wind whistles in Pia's ears—but they have to talk. "The flagship's down."

"I know," Saheeli answers. An explosion to their right sends them swerving; Saheeli only barely manages to keep them from flipping. "The smaller ships are doing what they can. The tendrils can't grasp them quickly enough to stop them. Of course, their firepower is lacking in comparison..."

Pia ducks as Saheeli takes them between the legs of a massive Phyrexianized lizard construct. Metal scrapes against metal; the cruiser's sides dent and distort despite Saheeli's best efforts. Oil drips onto the trunk's lid. Pia tries not to wonder how long it'll be before the cruiser is corrupted too.

"Do you know what the situation is at the Aetherflux Reservoir?" Pia asks.



*"Invasion of Kaladesh", by Leon Tukker.*

"We think the Phyrexians might understand its importance, or else feel a pull toward the aether stored there," Saheeli answers. "If you'll notice, they're all heading straight for it."

They turn a corner, and Pia sees the guards.

Her stomach wrenches at the sight. Like a sinister parody of Saheeli's design aesthetics, they are filigreed in white porcelain, half metal and half flesh. One of the men sports a large hole in the center of his head,



one that Pia can see clear through. Only his ears, scalp, and chin remain. It looks as if he is a needle meant to be threaded—and the razor his arms have become only affirms the notion. Despite this hideous alteration, his chest rises and falls with unseen breath. His head, such as it is, is turned toward the Reservoir.

Pia covers her mouth.

"We can't do anything to save them," Saheeli says.

"There has to be something."

"There might be, but whatever it is will take study, experimentation, iteration. Once the city's secure we can consider what shapes that might take—but not now."

Pia presses her eyes shut as the cruiser shoots over the newly converted Phyrexians. There are more of them to see when she opens her eyes again. Has she been ignoring them before now? There are so many, in so many different forms: Some share the same porcelain plating motif as the tendrils overhead, some have their organs replaced with glowing orange flame. She sees a street dog that has grown quills and tendrils twice its size. It'd be comical if the world wasn't falling apart around her.

"Have you heard from the others?" she asks, before she can stop herself.

Saheeli's eyes don't leave the Reservoir far ahead of them. "I have. The last time they saw Chandra, she was all right."

Pia's been around politicians long enough to know when she isn't getting the whole story. "And when was that?"

"Recently, very recently," Saheeli answers. She looks over her shoulder. "This might not be the best time."

"There isn't a good time when it comes to bad news."

"There are *better* times than this."

Pia frowns. "Please, just tell me what's going on."

Saheeli glances around. "She's—"

"Renegade Prime! Long time no see!"

Pia turns. Along with the spritely voice comes the rumble of an engine. Hanging over the side of a skimmer above them is one of her old Renegade contacts, Baji. "Need any help down there?"

"We can use all the help we can get," she says. "We're headed to the Reservoir."

"Come on in, then!" calls the pilot. "You'll get there faster in this. And we've got better firepower, too."



Saheeli looks up. "He's not joking. Those weapons aren't legal."

The Renegades were always great at securing contraband. Pia stands in the passenger seat of the cruiser, one hand on the seat and the other on the door. Saheeli doesn't slow down—not even when Pia offers her a hand.

"There's only room for one more in that skimmer," Saheeli says.

When one of the geniuses of Kaladesh tells you what she wants to do, it behooves you to listen. Besides, when it comes to revolutions and crises, you must be able to improvise. "Right," Pia says. "We'll cover you."

As Baji swoops lower, he reaches out for Pia. The skimmer's not the most solid thing in the world, not by a long shot. Now that they're in it she wonders how it's flying at all—nuts and bolts rattle around them, and the seat's little more than a strip of leather on hard, hastily shaped metal. The back seat's so narrow that the sides bite against her shoulders.

Baji angles the craft up, climbing higher, Ghirapur vanishing below the clouds as they rise into the sky. He flips a switch on his console and a glass dome slides over the open cockpit. "Helmet's under your seat," Baji says.Pia pulls the helmet on. She can't help but notice the chips and scraps on the cockpit glass. "Is this thing secure?" she asks.

"It'll hold," Baji said. "I put it together myself. Used only the finest scrap, straight from—"

Whatever he meant to say is lost in a gurgle when a javelin punches through the window and impales him through the chest to his seat, blood-soaked tip stopping only a hairsbreadth from Pia. Swooping through the air above them is something that might once have been a bird. Now it fights for Phyrexia. Realization sets in—that's no javelin, it's a *quill*. Alarms howl, drowned out by the air screaming in through the hole in the ship's cockpit. Slowly, it begins to tip to the side, and then twist nose first, plummeting toward the ground. Pia's stomach lurches at the shift in momentum, the nauseating weightlessness. Without thinking she squeezes into the pilot's seat, wedging the quill free from the leather. Baji's body has her half-pinned. There's no room to navigate, the console's an incomprehensible hodgepodge of welded together parts, there are two Phyrexian birds on her flanks and more ships all around.

This isn't good.

And that's before factoring in that Pia Nalaar has never even flown one of these things before.

But she isn't about to give up here. Not when it comes to keeping Kaladesh safe, and not when it comes to her daughter.

Chandra's going to come to tea next month.

Pia's going to be there to meet her.



If she can just get through this.

...

From the second Atraxa arrived, New Capenna drew its nails down her pristine carapace. A city built reaching ever upward, the atmosphere crackling with a disgusting energy, crawling with a horribly diversity of life. Everything about it is anathema to her—to Phyrexia.

How fortunate that her orders are to scour it.

But Phyrexia is not a beast that eats without thought. In all things there is the seed of greatness, no matter how base the material. To be Phyrexian is to allow yourself to grow, to change, to become something greater than you once were. The spire that so vexes her can be stripped of its accoutrements and rendered anew.

This is a place teeming with sin and filth, and Atraxa will be its savior.

The work alone is enough to fill her with ecstasy. All along the rooftops the organics take up arms. Their weapons will not serve them here: there are no dents in Phyrexia's armor. Nor will climbing higher save them. A single thought from Atraxa summons swarms of flying servitors. Tiny though they may be, they are hungry beasts—soon, those that climb are nothing more than bones falling to the earth. Those that take to the streets instead rely on their muscle and sinew to fight back. They are ig-

norant to the weaknesses of flesh. The war engines crash through storefront after storefront to fulfill their will. As they reach the street they unleash clouds of caustic gas. Flesh melts from bone.

*Harvest them*. One glorious thought, echoed in a thousand minds. They take no prisoners here on New Capenna; there are no cages for the fleshlings. What the engines cannot melt with their gasses is shoveled back inside of them by servitors. Only these parts will remain.

*Harvest. Them*. How loudly the words ring in her mind! The organics try to fool the Phyrexians, disappearing into the dark and reappearing behind them, but it is no use. Nothing is going to prevent what is to come. Neither will the spells hurled in desperation, or the blades driven between the ribs of centurions. Phyrexia can never be defeated.

But flesh... flesh will always yield, in the end.

Norn's orders were clear: everything that draws wretched breath on this plane must be harvested for parts—and so they will be. But Atraxa sees a use for them before tearing them asunder.

After all, somewhere within this monstrosity of a world are the remains of her predecessors. Finding them is part of her assignment here.

The minds of the newcomers open readily to her. Maestros, they call themselves. The thrill of their new bodies ripples through the entirety of





*"Sculpted Perfection", by Chris Seaman.*

the invading force, lending them strength against those who foolishly resist. Yet this is not the answer she seeks, not the answer Phyrexia needs. Deeper into their minds she ventures.

Within them, Atraxa finds something curious.

*Beautiful*.

Over and over, that word. That idea. It never comes alone—always with images or sounds or tastes. Paint on canvas. Stone shaped by a stu-

dious hand. Flowers opening in the night. A keening creak from a wooden instrument. These things, she surmises, must be *beautiful*, and what is *beautiful* must be important. Often it is the first thought they have when they look at their new forms, the first word that pops into their minds.

But what is that? Why are they so preoccupied with it? The strength of their conviction's spread through the invading forces, each mind amplifying the last. The word rings within Atraxa's skull until she can no longer escape it.

Norn warned her about this. She said there was something about this place that would try to infect her, something that her previous life might lend her resistance against. There are distant memories in her mind of *beauty*, of a pale imitation of compleation she once reveled in. This is the face and name of her enemy—and those who spent so long worshipping this false divinity must know where it lives.

Searching their minds provides another answer: *museum*.

The images that come along are clear enough. Surveying the city, she sees it not far from one of the conversion pods: a squat building festooned in marble shaped this way and that. She looks at it and wonders if it is *beautiful*. Those who were once Maestros tell her that it is. The columns, the statues, the carefully curated ivy crawling upon its facade: how could she ever think it was anything but *beautiful*?



The furor of their passion drives her on. Whatever it is they are hiding, she must be able to get a better idea of it there. As Phyrexia tears through the resistance, Atraxa lands upon the steps outside of the building. The doors are too small for her; with a touch, she corrects their already apparent failures. This place, too, shall embrace Phyrexia.

Inside there are more incomprehensible works. Fleshy beings stare back from canvases or panels of wood—a testament to the frailty of natural materials. So great is the arrogance of these creatures that they have shaped stone and metal in their image. The wretched inversion rankles Atraxa. All of this does. Why would anyone bother with any of this? These "paintings" often portrayed only a single individual; even those with groups did not portray more than a dozen. Why extol the virtues of so few when it is by many hands that great work is done? And these statues! Even more individual than the paintings!

Her spear makes short work of them. The newly formed scream in the recesses of the Phyrexian mind, but only for a moment; that part of them is dying, and understands that this is for the best. All will be one. These works no longer matter.

And yet something deep within that same mind tells her that she must keep going. There is something here. At the very least she can see to the destruction of the heresy around her.

Deeper within there are more atrocities. Worse, if it can be believed. Here the works no longer represent anything at all: they are sharp, geometrical replications of organic creatures. Neither weapons nor bulwarks; she can imagine no purpose for them. These, too, she strikes down, her frustration growing.

It is the last room which answers her questions.

Here there are no strange objects, here there is no paint, no mortal loudly announcing their own individual self. Instead the shapes she sees are pale imitations of glory. A lopsided axe upon the wall, a mock war hound carapace upon a plinth, images that occlude the glory of compleation... Norn told her Phyrexians had once been here, but this speaks to the cruelty organics think themselves above.

*Beautiful*, that word again in her mind, that awful word, but there is nothing beautiful about any of this. Do these people worship failure? Do they look upon the bodies of those that came before and marvel at them? The memories of the Maestros are a battering ram: groups gathered around these remains, drinking and eating and chittering with their wet lips and glistening tongues.

*"Can you imagine being the guy swinging that thing around?"*

*"I'll tell you something, I wish I could hire him to follow me around and just stand there looking intimidating."*



*"Say, how much do you think it's worth...? I've got half a mind to buy it myself."*

*"C'mon, pal, there's no way you could afford it."*

Her grip on her spear tightens. Wrong, wrong, wrong. This place, the Phyrexians who were too weak to see their mission through, the fleshlings who mock them. *Beautiful*, that awful word they have for this, cannot mean other than *wrongness*.

Atraxa will strike it down. All of it, everything that bears the name, must be destroyed. To allow it to exist only invites further mockery—and Phyrexia shall not be mocked.

As phyresis creeps over the building's facade, she obliterates everything within it. What purpose it will serve is not for her to decide. What is useful of them will linger and what is not will be stripped away. Tail, claw, spear, and scream: her weapons are unerring and untiring. Scrap and rubble are all that remain when she is done. What inhabitants she encounters are smeared across the rocks. In their last moments, they might imagine that they are beautiful.

But she never wants to hear the word again. If she could scour it from the mind of Phyrexia, she would, but that is a thing only the Mother of Machines may decree.

Still, Elesh Norn appointed her to lead these forces, which means she can strike down beauty here, if she pleases. Atraxa needs only think the order for it to go out. To her satisfaction, as she emerges from the museum, she hears weapons striking stone all around.

The satisfaction does not last long.

Across the courtyard there are angels staring at her—angels with faces of stone.

It is not a conscious thing that happens next—it is not a thought she has, but an instinct. At once she realizes that the stone seraphs of the cathedral are indeed beautiful, and that she hates them more than she has ever hated anything, more than she knew it was possible to hate. The chorus of minds falls away to the resounding note of anger hammering throughout her being. In a blur of white, she strikes the heads from the statues. When they crumble to the ground, she does not stop attacking them but continues bringing her spear down, over and over, again and again, heedless of the hazy energy that emerges from the rock. Though it sears her carapace and her sinews are alight with agony she cannot bring herself to stop until nothing remains of the heads but a fine dust.

Only then does she stop. Only then does she hear Phyrexia again.

*There are fleshlings climbing the tower. What must be done with them?*



One voice speaks, and then another: *harvest them, harvest them.*

*But this vapor pains us, and we ache.*

*Phyrexia does not ache. Harvest them.*

Atraxa looks up at the headless figures. A deep calm comes over her. Beauty is dead, and she can turn her attentions once more to the front—to the beings on the outside of the tower, and what they might be planning.

She leaves the platform.

But the Seraphs remain, watching her go, with their visitor hovering among them in a haze of color.

They, too, speak among themselves.

*Why not stop her?* asks the visitor.

*It is not yet the time.*

It does not feel like the right answer—but the visitor cannot disprove it.

*Have faith. It's almost here, the end. You'll know what to do when we've gotten there.*

# EPISODE V
# Cathartic Reunion

CHANDRA JOURNEYS TO NEW PHYREXIA
AND MAKES A DISTURBING DISCOVERY.

Kaya, Kaito, and Tyvar warned her of Phyrexia's endless, undulating torture chambers. To hear them tell it, New Phyrexia is less a place in and of itself and more like being trapped within the organs of a gargantuan creature. Tubes running every which way form its veins and arteries; the chrome steps leading to the Invasion Tree are its ribs; the Tree itself is a foul spine. The picture she'd gotten in her mind's eye was as clear as it was horrifying.

But when she arrives, she sees something different. There's no mistaking that they're in the belly of the beast—only it's not the same beast those three saw. This place is full of blinding light illuminating the ossuary structures around them. The Invasion Tree is still the creature's spine, but it is complemented by sharp white outcroppings. Platforms, Chandra

thinks, each swarming with Phyrexians going about their fell duties. Like ants along leaves, especially when seen from a platform so far below.

Chandra can't comprehend how tall the Invasion Tree is. The original on Kaldheim is supposed to be huge, but this is bigger than the God-Eternals had been, bigger than anything she'd ever seen. Even tilting her head to the point of pain she cannot see its crown. She expected Wrenn to say something about it, but maybe her companion's silence on the subject is worse.



*"Into the Fire", by Grzegorz Rutkowski.*



"Come now, we mustn't take root," is the only thing Wrenn says before she starts moving. The flames within her spit and crackle against their containment. Fire is always eager to show how it feels.

She's off toward a broken, needle-shaped structure not far from the platform where they've landed. Wrenn's noticed the same thing Chandra has: there are people at the base of that needle, people clambering down from its height. Golden armor makes them stand out against all the red and the white around them—and the skin beneath that armor even more so. Metal horns and spikes tell her they aren't quite human, but they aren't Phyrexian either. Each moves in their own time, and blood smears the clothes of some.

Chandra's feet carry her toward the others, each footfall heavy with anticipation. Coming here had been the right thing to do, she's sure of it, and here is the evidence: survivors in need of assistance. Teferi always said difficult times made quick allies.

"Taking that scrambler down paid off. I didn't expect help so soon," calls one of the survivors near the base of the needle. To her surprise he doesn't seem all that happy to see her. Steel juts from his skin like the scales on a serpent's brow, a stark contrast to Phyrexian aesthetics. . He must have some kind of kinship with the stuff; some of the other survi-

vors float to the bridge, clinging to rocks he seems to control. Wrenn is quick to help with Seven's tall reach.

"Came as soon as we could," she says. "My name's Chandra. This is Wrenn."

"Planning to stick around?"

"What? Of course we are. We wouldn't have come otherwise," Chandra says.

"That might mean you die here." He crosses his arms, studies her. One of the women in the group sighs. Unlike any of the others gathered, there's not a trace of metal on her anywhere. Against the hard lines of New Phyrexia's landscape, her features are soft.

"I'll take that chance. There's too much on the line to sit back and do nothing," says Chandra.

A beat passes between them—him narrowing his eyes, her staring him down. After what seems too long given the circumstances, he nods. "Koth," the man says, introducing himself. "That's Melira. Is it just you two?"

"For now," Chandra says. "I mean, maybe. I don't think—"

Koth palms the back of his head. He seems to be considering. "Two people." As his gaze falls to the ground, Chandra follows it. There are other bodies among the Phyrexian centurions—human ones. Her heart sinks.



She can't let it stay in the depths. When it comes to war, morale is as important as tactics and supplies. "*Two Planeswalkers*. And we're all you're going to need. Wrenn's got a plan."

"Is that so?" Koth asks. "A plan. Wonderful."

"Don't be so dour," Melira cuts in. "We can't abandon hope now. It might be something we haven't tried."

"She's right, you know," Wrenn says. "You can't have tried this. There aren't any other dryads symbiotically bonded to trees."

Chandra's not sure if it's a joke—sometimes, with Wrenn, it's hard to tell. She surprises herself by laughing anyway. The woman smirks a little too, and that feels like its own kind of victory.

Koth remains skeptical. "Let's hear this idea you've got," he says.

"It's simple. We'll head for the tree. Once we're there, I'll attach myself to him, and try to guide him," Wrenn answers.

"She's good at that. Really good!" Chandra adds when Koth narrows his eyes. "We might have a friend who can help, too. Maybe you've heard of Teferi?"

"No."

"Well," Chandra runs a hand through her hair, "he's the strongest time mage who's ever lived, so there's that, and he's a good friend of mine, so he'll help if we ask."

"And where is this Teferi?" asks Koth.

Chandra glances at Wrenn, who gives her an inexplicable and mysterious nod. "He's coming. Anyway, once we're at the tree, the rest'll come together. We're going to use it against them."

Koth crosses his arms. "And you're certain you can do this, Wrenn?"

"As certain as anyone can be."

He makes a small, considering sound. "Right. We don't have many other options. When we lost Karn, they took him over that way too. Norn wanted to give him special treatment. We may as well try to gain control of the tree, and rescue him at the same time."

"We'll have to move fast," says the woman. "Norn probably doesn't think a handful of rebels are a threat. We can use that hubris to our advantage, and strike before she realizes how threatening we can be." "Base of the tree is heavily guarded. More centurions than she knows what to do with. We try it that way, everyone's dead before we start," Koth catches their eyes again. "You two fine with a rough trip?"

"Whatever it takes, I'm in," Chandra says. Wrenn nods as well.



"Good. Because you're not the only one with a powerful friend," he starts.

...

"When you said friend..."

"He's a friend. For now. Maybe more like he isn't an enemy. It's complicated."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

Chandra isn't. Staring at her own reflection in Urabrask's polished carapace, she's not sure what to think. He hasn't attacked yet, but maybe he's waiting for the right time. He hasn't insulted her or gone on about unity, but maybe this is all a cover.

She crosses her arms.

Urabrask lets out a breath. "Such keening mouths," he says. "Infighting will be the death of your kind."

Chandra frowns. He's right, and she kind of hates that he is. Wrenn offers a consolatory hand on her shoulder as Urabrask turns toward the edge of their platform.

"The main pathways to the Invasion Tree are guarded by more Phyrexians than your mind can hold in one place," he explains. He doesn't need

to point them out with his claws, but he does. “If one of them sees us, Norn will know instantly. Koth learned this earlier. As a show of goodwill, I told him of the passage you took to get to this platform.”

The path they’d taken was well hidden. At the time Chandra thought Koth sensed it beneath the ground with his powers. They hadn’t seen a single patrol on their way through the twisting passage. A good thing, too, with how narrow some of it got.

“Organic eyes can behold the Realmbreaker without obstruction from here. More importantly, the trajectory is clear, and lies within the boundaries of your cognition. Your chance of success is still almost non-existent.”

“I came here to help,” Chandra snaps. “I don’t care what some Phyrexian weirdo thinks of me, I’m going to do what I can here. Why are you even helping us, anyway?”

Fire roars from the eyeholes of Urabrask’s carapace. “Because Norn stifles the fires of creation with her pontificating. Phyrexia cannot thrive if there is only one Phyrexia.” Magma drips from his jaws, plumes of smoke rising from the holes they burn. “Even a Newt understands. Urabrask serves no one.” Melira steps between the two of them. “Let’s keep our eyes on the prize. The plan’s to have Koth fling you two over the divide.”

“Why just us?” Chandra asks. Truth be told, she’s grateful for the break.



“The rest of the Mirrans will provide a tantalizing distraction for the so-called Mother of Machines. They’ll find a patrol somewhere and pick a fight. She’ll focus on eliminating them, leaving our path in the air free.”

That… is maybe the simplest plan Chandra’s ever heard to deal with the most precarious situation she’s ever encountered. Flinging them across the divide? She takes a step to the edge of the platform. The chasm that yawns before her could probably fit all of the tallest buildings in Ghirapur stacked together. The platform overlooking the Tree is so far she can cover it with her thumb.

“Oh. I’m not fond of aerial travel,” Wrenn says.

“It won’t last long,” Koth says. “I can launch us from here. Urabrask says that platform’s mostly used for maintenance. Norn has the elf busy doing something else right now, so it should be clear.”

The elf. Despite all the fire in her heart, Chandra’s blood runs cold at the thought. They’re being so casual about it. She wants to snap at them again, to say that Nissa’s important in ways they can’t understand, but if she does they might think less of her. She came here to help the Multiverse, after all. Rescuing Nissa’s a small thing in comparison.

But if that’s her platform, and if she’s there…

“Let’s do it,” Chandra says.

"Glad you're on board," says Koth.

"The moment your dryad makes contact with the Tree, Norn will know. We'll need to act quickly. Quick as your flesh can go without sloughing off." Urabrask has already turned toward the edge of the platform. Curiously, he leans down and begins carving sigils into the metal below them.

This tiny clutch of people is all that stands between Phyrexia and the Multiverse. The weight on her shoulders threatens to crush her. Chandra paces, as if to offset it by moving. Wrenn and Seven remain standing where Koth told them to be, looking ahead at the amassed forces. The air here isn't good for Seven—the tips of her branches have gone black. Just what is it doing to the rest of them? How long can they be here before they start changing, too? That last bit of Halo won't last forever.

"Are you ready?" Koth asks.

Chandra stops, one leg on either side of an inscribed rune. Over and over, she opens and closes her hands. "Yeah."

"Certainly," says Wrenn.

Koth nods. "Mirrans, are we ready?"

Chandra can't call the answering shouts hearty, or even confident. No, she's heard that kind of tone before, and it's closer to desperation than



it is to hope. Her chest hurts. She counts them, the Mirrans, wondering how many will be gone by the next time she sees them.

Koth drives his fist into the earth.

The runes beneath their feet flash to life. An instant later they're shot straight into the air with only the stone beneath them as an anchor. Air whips across their faces; Chandra shields her eyes to keep them from tearing up.



*"Coming In Hot", by Cristi Balanescu.*

Behind her, she can hear Koth's shout: "Keep yourself in the air if you have to!"

Would it be better if she was down there, with him?

It's no use wondering.

Especially when they've got company in the air.

Chandra's not sure what she'd call the beasts that swoop in on the attack—they're a little like birds, a little like bats, and an awful lot of their bodies are made of bladed metal. What matters is that they're in the way, and if they're in the way, they're going to get blasted. Fire melts them as surely as it does everything else, though already she's starting to feel herself flag in between blows. On the other platform, Wrenn and Seven have grabbed one and used it to beat the others into retreat.

They aren't in the air long, but the bladed bats swarm them the whole time. Chandra's so busy fighting them off that she can't keep track of where they are in relation to the tree. Impact rockets her onto one of the Invasion Tree's lower branches. Her bones groan as she's thrown onto the jagged white surface. She's pretty sure one of her ribs cracked, because it hurts to breathe, but she needs to breathe if she's going to get anywhere.

One of the blade-bats swoops down on her, its wings forming a drill. Her teeth rattle from the sound. Chandra fumbles, rolls out of the way,



pushes herself up on an outcropping. The blade-bat's shifted weapons: now, when it dives at her, it means to pin her to the wall. A hasty blast of fire sees it melted into a ball of metal at her feet.

Chandra takes a painful breath. "Almost there."

"Yes, I suppose that's so," answers Wrenn. "...How odd. It's so quiet."

Chandra doesn't know if she's heard Wrenn sound afraid before now.

But she understands why. This tree is huge—bigger than anything Wrenn's ever tried to bond with, and nastier besides.

There's a very real chance this is going to be the last tree she ever joins. And as much as part of her wants to talk Wrenn out of it, she can't. The whole thing reeks of *practicality* and *sacrifice*, but ultimately it isn't her choice. It's Wrenn's. And as far as they know, it's their best shot.

Plates along the tree shift and reform. Chandra tries to blast them, but she isn't fast enough; they form into centurions before she can get rid of all of their parts. There's got to be a couple dozen of them—most armed with swords, but some with their arms changed into lances. One's taken the shape of a strange metallic hound.

She backs up against Seven.

"We're going to have to act fast," Chandra says. "Can you get started? I'll cover you."

"...Y-yes, I can."

Something shifts behind her. Chandra readies another blast of fire. Flames engulf the branch, consuming two of the gathered centurions, but they don't move. The whole time they're burning, none of them move.

"Wrenn, I've got a bad feeling—" She starts.

But the mouths of the centurions birth their answer, slick-skinned with black oil and corruption. "We do not want to hurt you. We only want to welcome you home."

Hearing a lone woman's voice emerging from so many throats, doubled and doubled again, sets Chandra's teeth on edge. "I don't care. Come on, Wrenn—"

Two spears fly at her just as she glances behind. Chandra hardly has time to scream before they've pinned her to the white-plated tree. Somehow her clothes are the only thing damaged—the spears landed just below her armpits. She's a sitting target up here, but if Wrenn can free her, they may still have a chance.

But as she starts to shout, she sees what's been keeping Wrenn occupied.



A figure faces down Wrenn. Green magic crackles around her metallic body, her four arms all acting as conduits. One—a blade—slices off Seven's thickest branch as if snapping a twig. Magic weaves around Wrenn and Seven's remaining limbs, binding them together, then lifting them in the air.

"We can perfect you the way we've perfected her," the voices speak. "All of your flaws, your weaknesses, gone. You will never be lonely again once you've become one with us."

The words aren't reaching her. Not now.

Because she recognizes that face. She'd recognize it anywhere—the way its cheeks round when it laughs, the ears prone to twitching, the small nose, the mouth so often quirked into a secret smile. If all the memories in Chandra's head poured out of her like molten metal into a blacksmith's pitcher, this one would remain stubbornly lodged inside.

Nissa.

It can't be—but it has to be. Even with two new arms grafted onto her body, even with black tears streaking her cheeks, even when so much of her is now copper root and bramble—Chandra recognizes her.. Even the way she tilts her head toward Chandra is the same. Words unsaid weigh down Chandra's tongue; the agony of recognition tears at her heart. To

recognize her... to recognize Nissa like this hurts worse than dying, she's almost sure—what could hurt more than this?

But then Nissa speaks, and Chandra has her answer. Nissa's voice is the one thing they haven't changed. "You're afraid, aren't you? My new form must be hard for you to understand."

"Nissa," Chandra creaks. It's all she can get out. There are too many other words backed up in her head right now, all struggling to get out: *this isn't you, you don't have to work for her, we can find some way to fix this, please stop, I'm sorry we ever stopped talking*.

But all that comes out—time and time again—is Nissa's name.

Nissa doesn't react. There is no small smirk, no glint in her eye, no expression at all as she turns back toward Wrenn and Seven.

Two more spears pin Chandra in place. One lands in her calf. She screams, pressure building behind her eyes. Fire licks at her fingers. The breaths she tries to take don't do anything to soothe it.

"You don't have anything to be afraid of," Nissa says. Her tone is awful and flat. As Chandra watches, she tears Seven limb from limb—the sharp quills and blade of her new body working in tandem with her magic. Wrenn's screaming, too, fire flaring behind her eyes, but Nissa still does



not react. When only Wrenn's small, dryad form remains, Nissa lets her fall to the floor. "I no longer feel any pain."

"This... This isn't about...!" Chandra stammers. It's getting hard to think, there's so much energy building up inside her, and none of it has anywhere to go.

Nissa turns toward her. "Is it about your plan? That's already failed. The Mother of Machines sent me to stop you."

"Why?" it comes out a scream, an accusation.

"Because what you're doing is short-sighted. You've always been short-sighted." A flick of her hand and the centurions stand down. Another, and they remove the spears—even the one that's pierced Chandra's calf. Freedom isn't much help. With the pain shooting through her leg, Chandra isn't running anywhere soon.

If she wanted to, she could fight back. Cauterizing wounds isn't difficult for a fire mage. She could take all of this energy building up inside and let it loose. There's no way anyone could walk away from a blow like that. At this rate there might be enough building up to do some serious damage to the tree, too. No matter the "improvements" Norn's made, no metal can withstand the heart of a sun, right?

"You wanted to be the hero, didn't you? You wanted to save me and the Multiverse in one fell swoop. Unfortunately, you've gotten things backward. I'm here to save you. As always."

It would be the easiest thing in the world to let loose.

But if she does...

Chandra's tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth.

Nissa takes a step toward her. The smile breaking out across her face is wide and toothy and not at all like her. "Out of all your companions, only you and the dryad chose to face us. Your kind lack unity and understanding."

"More are coming," Chandra says. She screws her eyes shut. If she doesn't look, it's easier to keep everything in. Easier, too, to bathe this whole branch in flame. If she wanted to. If she doesn't look into Nissa's corrupted eyes, she won't have to remember what her face looks like while it's—no. No, she can't. It isn't just about her, or Nissa, or any one person. There are Mirrans dying underfoot to give them the chance to be here. Hundreds of planes are relying on them to take this tree down. However hot her fire burns, Chandra knows she can't take out the tree in one go.



She opens her eyes. There is Nissa, gesturing with her blade-arm, movements sharp and precise and not at all her own. "Look around you. Don't fear, I'll wait."

Chandra can't help herself—she looks. She wishes she hadn't.

There is an army on the other side of the bridge. A teeming, numberless army, the light shimmering off their sleek, silvery forms. A draconic monstrosity in the vanguard carries a blue banner. Next to it is a towering being, one Chandra must assume is their general. Every fall of their feet is a thunderclap, every weapon an arrow in the back of their hopes.

She can't even see the Mirrans from here. How are they going to take out a force like that?

"I asked the Mother of Machines for her blessing to speak with you the moment I knew what you were planning. The resistance never had a chance. But I knew there was a chance for you. I know what you could be, if you only join with us."

Norn knew. The whole time they'd been here, she knew what was going on. The sparse resistance they'd met wasn't because Norn was occupied with the invasion, but a trap.

And now they're all going to die, or worse.

Grief is a porcelain shard in her throat. She tries to swallow. All it does is hurt more.

Chandra takes a step backward. Her heel hangs off the rounded ground of the overlook platform. One more step and she'll fall—a burning star, the dashed hopes of the Multiverse.

Nissa takes another step forward. Brazen, now, she traces a metallic claw along Chandra's cheekbone—but it still isn't Nissa that's speaking. Chandra feels sick. "We are offering you the holiest of graces: freedom from this fear. When you join our congregation, you will never know loneliness again. We would never leave you to die alone."

"I'm not alone," Chandra snaps. She isn't. Wrenn's laying on the ground, in pain, but alive. While Nissa's been talking, Wrenn's been pulling herself closer and closer to the tree.

For all of a second, there's hope in Chandra's eyes.

Nissa soon follows Chandra's gaze to the fallen dryad. A bitter laugh leaves her lips. Copper branches spring from the tree's surface to clutch Wrenn tight.

Wrenn screams.

"We see now. You're still alive. Impressive. You will make a fine guardian for Realmbreaker," Nissa says. After a moment's consideration, Nissa's



head turns toward Chandra once more. "As for you—we shall say only this: there are many ways to serve Phyrexia. When you join the fold, you'll discover what it is you were truly meant to be."

Chandra's breath is coming ragged. Her head's pounding. Jaya could talk her through this, but Jaya's dead; Gideon could soak up anything she threw at him, but he's dead, too.

And now there's Nissa.

But there's Wrenn, too. And as Nissa advances once more, Wrenn catches Chandra's eye. Flames flicker within her pale body. The metal around her begins to glow. With the centurions averting their eyes and Nissa focused on Chandra, Norn has no way of knowing what's about to happen.

*Breathe,* she tells herself. *Hold on a little longer.*

Chandra's other heel hits the edge. Fire swirls around her forearm. "I'm not giving up here."

Nissa's ears droop, her lips part. A softness creeps in around her oil-slicked cheeks. How many times has she seen this look? In the cold hours of the night, before the sun rose, when they used to talk about whatever came to mind; whenever Chandra spat out an idea that didn't quite make sense and Nissa wasn't quite sure how to tell her. How many times has she seen it?



*"Traumatic Revelation", by Cristi Balanescu.*

Why does it hurt so much now?

"Chandra."

That's her voice. Nissa's voice. Without any of the interference, without Norn's influence—just Nissa.

Chandra's flames flicker out.

Nissa holds out her hand. "Please, come with us. I miss you."



A life without fear. A life without the others second-guessing every decision she's ever made. A life free of loneliness and pain. Even if they stop Phyrexians here, won't something else take its place? Bolas, the Eldrazi, Elesh Norn—there was always a tyrant. But if she takes that hand right now, that story could end.

It'd be like running away together.

Running away from their problems, and their responsibilities, and everyone who'd sacrificed everything to get them here.

"I miss you too," Chandra says. Tears burn at her eyes. "I miss you so much. But I can't. I'm sorry."

All that familiarity, all that softness, is gone an instant. Nissa's face is a mask of rage in the moment before the fire.

Chandra ducks below Nissa's slicing arm and drives her fiery fist into the branch itself. One second of blinding orange is all the warning they get before the ground beneath them explodes. The impact sends her and Nissa hurtling away, the centurions dropping like stone hail. Only Wrenn is close enough to the tree to cling to it.

She's going to have to handle it from here.

# EPISODE VI
# The Last to Leave

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NORN CELEBRATES HER MOMENT OF VICTORY.
ELSPETH MAKES A CHOICE.

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Fear is the first thing she remembers.

Next comes the smell of the thing: burning pitch, ozone. It sticks to the roof of her mouth, and there is nowhere she can go to escape it.

By the time she hears the skittering of its claws against the stone her eyes fly open, and she reaches for her sword. There: the monster with talons as long as a hunting hound, hundreds of sharp teeth, sightless vestigial sockets. A girl cowers opposite the beast, pressing herself to the cold stone wall. Between the girl and the monster there is a body curled on its side: an older woman, her throat torn open. Her blood slicks the monster's chittering jaw as it lunges for the girl.

What strikes her then—beyond the fact that she has eyes, and can see—is that none of this is new to her. She knows this place. She was here, once. This mildewed dungeon is only a stone's throw from her old family

home. She knows that the girl has been here for a week, possibly more—that she is hungry and thirsty and has lost all hope. She knows that the woman on the ground is the girl's mother.

This time, she does what the girl could only dream of doing. This time, she has a sword. The creature lunges for the girl, but she steps between the beast and the child. Claws rake against armor as it closes in. Just as it opens its jaws to bite at her, she drives her sword through the roof of its mouth. Black tar bubbles from the wound and drips down the length of her blade. She withdraws it. The creature, rasping, curls up on the ground. Another cut sees its head separated from its body. She kicks it away.

So easy. It had been so easy. Had she ever found this sort of thing difficult?

Memories knock about in her head. The girl needs to go somewhere. There is something else she should be doing. The woman needs a proper burial, but she will never have one, and it is best not to dwell on such thoughts.

And... wasn't there something else?

What is it she's forgetting?

She shakes her head. The girl has thrown her arms around her in embrace. She tousles the girl's hair. "You're safe now."



"Thank you," answers the girl, in a voice without any trace of youth. "You did the right thing."

She looks between the creature's body, and the dead woman. "Keeping people safe is what I do."

"So it is. But keep in mind that you are seeing this with new eyes. Once, this was difficult for you."

Steps down the hall—heel, click, heel, click.

The girl's eyes begin to glow. She points to the door. "A splicer is coming."

The word tugs at something in her mind—the thing she's meant to remember. It occurs to her that she should find a girl with glowing eyes strange, but she doesn't. There's something familiar about her, too—so she kneels down to get a better look.

Two thick black brows, with the glossy hair to match—hair that never stayed put in anything but the sturdiest of braids. Round cheeks her mother used to pinch. A scar along her jaw from a fall she'd taken. What was it her mother had said then? Wounds like that belonged only to the flesh; to wear a scar was a choice. At the time she'd liked that choice. It made her feel braver, even if the cause wasn't so brave at all.

A sword sliding into a sheath.

She understands now.

The girl nods.

"Elspeth, it's time to wake up."

The floor gives out from under them, the walls fly away, the moldy ceiling is flung into another dimension. Around them the stars whisper their eternal secrets. The girl's face—her own face, but younger—shifts into her mother's. Blood drips from her torn throat onto her cloak.

"You have a choice to make."

Once more, she drops.

All around her the world starts to change. This village she was in—her village—is sealed beneath stone. Blocks build upon it bit by bit, assembled as if by some unseen child at play, while the trees rapidly fruit and wither, fruit and wither. The air begins to shimmer.

"Do you remember what you're becoming?"

A young girl's shadow. A face amidst the shimmering, beaming at her. Elspeth looks down at her own hands. They, too, are opalescent in the light of this place. A curious sensation prickles along her shoulder blades; a glittering feather falls down from nowhere to float before her. "Just so,"



says her mother. "You've done so well to get here, but there's one last step to take. You first must leave your old self behind."

"Is that why you brought me here?" she asks.

"You came here of your own volition. When presented with the impossible, you made a choice where others balked. You rewrote fate. Part of you knew it was time to awaken. The consequences of that choice are unfolding—and we are just ahead of its author, waiting for your chance to join the tale."

In killing the Phyrexian beast? No... another memory wells up: the Sylex, her friends arguing, a way that seemed clear and right if not easy. Didn't it explode? Maybe she's dead. Maybe all of this is a hallucination.

"It isn't."

"I don't like having someone read my thoughts," Elspeth says.

"You think loudly," answers the voice.

She sighs, or thinks she does, in this strange body. Before her the stones are stacking themselves higher and higher—a needle against the sky. As it reaches its peak she begins to recognize it. New Capenna.

"...What do I have to do?"

"You must make one more choice—and you have little time to make it. Your mortal wants and desires must not enter into the equation."

It sounded simple enough, but she had the feeling it wouldn't be.

"What do I have to choose?"

"All the worlds are aflame. You've seen some of what's happened, but not all. Soon, you'll see the rest. You must choose where to intervene," says the voice.

What did she mean by...? Ah. A cabin, an old friend in tears outside it; a woman in a ship swaying uneasily through the sky; a young man at war with something that was once a dragon. The fragments come together in her mind like a blasphemous sheet of stained glass.

Phyrexia.

This is about Phyrexia.

The moment she has the thought, the world above her shatters. New Capenna's skies go red as a pomegranate; a massive white structure pierces through the clouds. The structure—something like the tendril of a god—wraps about the city. Windows shatter, monuments tumble, girders snap. Cracks run up the side of the tower. Oil spills from the tendril, coating the surface in glistening black. Pods like carrion insects descend on the city.



But New Capenna isn't dead. Not yet. It can't be—the whole city is fortified against attack. She learned that herself.

Elspeth wants to see more. Soon she's surrounded on all sides by fire and rubble. The blood is ankle deep on the streets of New Capenna. It takes her a moment to realize the piles of leather along the curbs are the shucked skins of too-slow citizens. There are more Phyrexians around her than there are people.



*"Vanquish the Weak", by Gaboleps.*

And worse: floating above them all is something that once was an angel. The sight makes her feel sick in ways she cannot express.

"They call her Atraxa." The voice is different, now, yet not unknown. Her mother's. It isn't a convincing mimicry—but there is some warmth in Elspeth's heart at the sound, nonetheless. "An angel corrupted by the hands of four praetors. One of their most fanatical generals."

A whistle in the air. Something explodes against Atraxa's helm, but in its wake... nothing. Not a crack. She sweeps her scythe through a cluster of survivors as easily as a farmer reaping wheat.

Elspeth has seen war before. It is familiar to her, if never quite comfortable, to be in the thick of the melee. On Alara, Theros, and Mirrodin she raised her sword to protect the innocent, to find peace.

But this place is different. There isn't anything she can do. The quill of a Phyrexian beast shoots clean through her body. A faint tingle is all she feels—but behind her, its prey sinks dead to the ground. A bat-winged creature that might have once been a Maestro descends on a fleeing man. She tries to save the man only for her hands to fade through him.

"Remember what you've been told, El," says her mother. "You have to choose where to help."



Elspeth swallows. As she looks up, Atraxa sweeps the plaza once more. Heads and torsos fall to the ground beneath the watchful eye of the Seraphs.

"This place used to be home. I never imagined it'd grow to this size, of course, but it was home all the same," says her mother. "The Capennan people welcomed us with open arms. Decades later, they welcomed you, again."

Atraxa lets out a horrific screech. In the skies, the winged creatures array themselves into a grid.

"The invader has been given strict orders. There are to be no survivors on New Capenna. Only our organs and bones will live on."

Like arrows, the winged beasts descend upon the upper levels of Park Heights.

And it seems they have reason to.

Riveteers dangle precariously from whatever holds they can find, red-hot tools in hand. Bolts and nuts drop from the surface of the place like falling petals.

"There are some who fight," says her mother. "There are more who have given themselves over to corruption. Power's voice is booming, isn't it? But there are always some who fight against impossible odds. People who need help. Inspiration."

Closer still. Within the belly of Park Heights, orders are shouted to and fro, a cacophony of engineering. Gouts of steam melt the invaders' armor as they reach for those inside. Yet they cannot protect everyone—for every one Riveteer that is saved, two more are carried away between metal jaws.

They don't have long.

"You could be that for them. This was our home once. You could save it with your own two hands. Build something new."

Could it be? Although she'd met kind people who did welcome her, there were those who'd take any excuse to see her fall. Could she spend the rest of her days here?

The woman's words echo in her mind: she must make the right choice. She must do what's needed. Elspeth turns. She catches sight of the Seraphs once more and nods to them.

As dire as things seem, New Capenna had its defenders.

"This isn't the place," she says.

A thundering sound. The walls fly out again, becoming as flat as paintings before fading into the black. The longer she falls the more of them she sees. Students slinking down corridors, away from their changed professors; a woman in a black bridal dress singing above a horde of zombies; kor flying on mantas toward a great white structure.



She jerks to a stop between a red sky and a red sea. Overhead the fine fabric of stars ripples. The air tastes of salt.

Theros.

"Welcome home."

Elspeth's mouth opens. At once she is turning about in the void, searching for the speaker. "Daxos?"

"So you've not forgotten me, even with the new station," he says. His voice is warm and honey-sweet. Hearing it is enough to work loose the tension in her soul. "I'll take it as a compliment."

"Don't be ridiculous," she says. "I couldn't forget you if I tried." Yet there is a tightness in her chest, too, when she realizes she cannot see him.

And when her eyes land on Meletis.

Here, too, there is fire; here, too, there is rubble and ruin. Houses in which she'd taken tea are smashed to the ground. The market is little more than a smoldering heap.

"It is our time of need," he says. "And it is his time of need."

The view around them shifts again—though this time without Elspeth's say-so. They've left Meletis in favor of a temple's belly. Bright white statues are now slick with oil, their faces painted with Phyrexian masks.

Thick, dark smoke chokes the inner chamber. Within, people are packed so tight none can move. Porcelain masks and bony protrusions speak to their state.

A leonin stands atop the altar.

"The gods of Theros exist because we will it to be so. They serve at our behest. You know now the glory of Phyrexia, the glory of true unity—an unending bond between all that lives. Is that not a greater divinity?"



*"Alabaster Host Sanctifier", by Konstantin Porubov.*



"Persuasive as ever, isn't he?" Daxos says.

Elspeth's throat threatens to close.

"Do you see the cup in his hands? It's full of oil. And the woman there, kneeling next to him?"

The sight of Ajani disturbed her so much she'd missed the woman. From the smooth fabric she's wearing, and the gold jewelry adorning it, she must be a priestess.

Realization like a knife in the back. "He's trying to convert the gods?"

"Trying is putting it lightly. He's already changed three of them. Didn't even have to try. The Phyrexians are so fervent in their beliefs the gods have little hope of fighting back," Daxos answers.

"Phyrexian gods," she repeats. "With that sort of power, it'd be easy to..."

"There wouldn't be many places to hide," Daxos agrees. "But do you know where we are? Whose temple this is? Look carefully."

A statue's severed head among the wreckage. The moment she turns her attention to it, she feels like a fool. Heliod. Of course. This is meant to be a test for her—and what better way to test her than these two? On Theros, Elspeth found a new light to guide her. They'd parted on bad terms—but could she stand back and watch as Ajani anointed him in this foul oil?

The whistle of an arrow kills her thoughts. The bowl in Ajani's hand shatters; falling shards cut the priestess's face. As Ajani turns toward the shooter, the priestess tries to get away. Two in the crowd hold her aloft.

Another arrow slams into Ajani's shoulder. He pulls it out, snaps it in annoyance. "Find them!"

"So there are still heroes on Theros," Elspeth observes.

Somehow, she feels Daxos's hand on her shoulder. "Keep watching."

Darkness swallow them an instant, only to return them to a slightly different part of the temple. Hunters pursue a youth down one of the halls. Their leader—bearing multiple metallic heads—flings a net over him. One of the others takes the captured youth back to the altar. Ajani holds aloft the net with a single hand.

"Behold, one who turns away from the pack! One who plots against us!" The youth is screaming. Ajani cuts him loose, only to catch him by the hair. "What use is a mind that plots to sow dissent?"

Elspeth can't bear to look. She turns away—but there is no escaping the sound of crushed bone, or the cheers that follow. How could that be Ajani? How could he do such a thing?

"He was forced," Daxos says. "You could save him from this. If he were here—the real him—he'd welcome release."



"I'm not sure it's so simple."

She forces herself to look once more. The priestess is kneeling, again, and he is forcing her to drink the oil.

Light is coming to the temple.

But it is not rosy-fingered dawn, nor violet-cloaked dusk—it is the searing white light of the forge. The burning sun. Despite the fiery corona in the temple the faithful do not look away. Plumes of smoke rise from what remains of their skinless flesh.

"You're the bravest woman I've ever known, and you've always tried to do the right thing. If I were to trust anyone with saving Theros—it would be you."

She turns away again. Her thoughts race. If she chooses Theros, she must fight Ajani. If she fights him—there's likely no way to save him anymore. Once the corruption's taken root like this, there's little to be done. Yes, she's killed gods. Yes, she's loved this place, called it home.

And yes, she longs to see Daxos again.

But this isn't meant to be about her own wants and needs. What good does saving Theros do? The thought should pain her and yet it doesn't. What good does it do? If Ajani falls here, the invasions continue. Phyrex-

ian gods will wreak havoc on Theros—but are the people here any more worthy of salvation than the people of New Capenna?

Her mind's split in two. On one side her emotions rage like the seas outside the temple. On the other, only the waters of ablution.

Daxos's arms wrap around her waist. "I think you know what you have to do."

"Don't make me say it," she says, leaning back against him.

But there isn't anyone there.

The world falls away again.

She falls into a landscape where a lizard the size of a mountain fights its quilled silver counterpart. The oil and blood from their wounds form rivers along the lush green earth.

She falls into a castle, once shining, now reduced to rubble. A young man rifles through the broken remains of an armory. The plate covering him is cobbled together from these remains, and already pitted with black. When he finds a sigil among the dreck, he exclaims happily. Now, he thinks, he will be able to defend his family. But he hasn't so much as secured that armor properly, and his sword is ill-sized for his body; he will fall. She tries to call out to him to find a proper Sigiled knight, but he does not hear her, as she has already begun to fall again.



Through ranks of horsemen beating war drums, their hounds on the hunt for Phyrexian enemies; through a neon city protected by towering mechanical guardians; through strange swamps and twisted hills she falls and falls.

Until she lands in a place she hoped never again to see.

The Invasion Tree stands as proud testament to the unending triumphs of Elesh Norn. Red pulses from beneath its clean white plates as it reaches for the heavens—and, indeed, pierces them. An undulating army packs one of the bridges before it. Their banner and their forms—strangely curved, rife with tubes and vats—mark them as Jin-Gitaxias's creations. There must be thousands of them. How many are newly formed? How many come from the places she's just seen?

"You have a choice to make."

Desperation drives her closer to the base of the tree. She left—but the others must have stayed. They wouldn't abandon such an important fight. Surely there'd be someone.

But when she arrives at the base of the tree, Elesh Norn is the first creature she sees. Sat upon a porcelain throne, its sides uncomfortably close to spines, she surveys her creation. Before her, Urabrask is lashed to a machine. Two Centurions on either side wind wheels nearly as large as they

are. With every turning of the wheel, Urabrask's limbs are wrenched further away from his body. Now, he is little more than a howling pile of sinew.

Flanking Norn are two makeshift choirs—living instruments who sing the glories of Phyrexia. Still, what emerges from their unholy throats can hardly be called a song: they keen, they screech, they double their voices. Not once do they approach anything like a melody. Urabrask's dying screams do little to add harmony.

"There is no room for error."



*"Merciless Repurposing", by Artur Nakhodkin.*



Norn snaps her fingers. The choir stops. With another snap she dismisses Urabrask—the Centurions chop him into quarters and carry him off. With a third, she summons a group of flying creatures carrying great cargo between them. It isn't until they land that Elspeth recognizes Karn's ravaged body. Somehow, his eyes still show signs of life—but the pain within them is far stronger.

All the more so when he, like Elspeth, beholds what Norn is celebrating.

So small are the mortals before her that Elspeth hadn't noticed them at first: Mirrans, shackled together, their heads bowed. Blood slicks the faces of many. Some have already lost limbs. Splicers attend to those, grafting unwanted limbs onto unwilling recipients. Elspeth knows them. She's fought side by side with them. None deserve a fate like this.

"We understand that your minds cannot comprehend the glory that awaits you," Norn speaks, "and for that we offer our eternal pity. You have your skin's treachery to blame. Without it you will find yourself free of all burdens."

Elspeth reaches for her sword.

"Think about what you're doing. You only have one opportunity to choose." It's the woman's voice again. "Choose falsely and everything ends here."

"Norn has to die," Elspeth answers.

"Once, long ago, there was a beneficent woman in white, who created a world all her own," the voice begins. She remembers now. There was a god, wasn't there? One whose name was forbidden within the dungeon. One she prayed to, as a child. "A beautiful place—bright, peaceful. A place where angels dwelled. She made it so pleasant that she never had any thought to leave or look beyond it. Years passed, and a wizard came to her for aid. She never imagined the kind of threat that would follow in his wake." She gestures around them. "This threat. And it is not carried on by Norn alone. She believes herself to be the beginning and end of Phyrexia, but she is wrong. Killing her will not end this."

Centurions bring three more prisoners before Elesh Norn. They're tossed onto the ground. Two can't stand under their own power, or even kneel. Elspeth's stomach sinks as she recognizes them: a beaten Koth; the dryad Wrenn, torn from her tree; and a bloody Chandra Nalaar.

"Behold the traitors," speaks one of the centurions—and it's then that Elspeth recognizes her as Nissa. Or, at least, someone who once was Nissa Revane. Parts of her new body have melted down to slag. "Mother of Machines, we await your righteous judgment upon them."



"We applaud your work in apprehending them, Nissa," Norn speaks. "The trials and tribulations you faced have only served to scour all traces of your old life away. When you look upon them now, what do you feel?"

"Contempt. Pity."

"As it should be. But you needn't pity them for long. Soon they shall be reshaped and made whole. Compleation's rapture shall cleanse them as it has cleansed you."

Hovering behind them, Karn groans.

Elspeth's hand twitches around the pommel of her blade.

"Let our embrace of these rebels prove to all Phyrexia that we are not without mercy toward lesser beings. Phyrexia embraces all. Phyrexia perfects all. With your individuality flayed from your mind, you will come to understand what a blessing you've been given." Norn's smile is all sharp teeth. "Jin-Gitaxias. Come harvest what is left of Koth's little rebellion. You shall be the architect of their perfection."

The army parts. A figure slithers between them, tubes swaying from its maw. Jin-Gitaxis is soon at Norn's side. He bows. "As the Grand Praetor speaks, so Phyrexia wills."

He takes a step toward the gathered—and stops.

Everything stops. The rebels are frozen mid-breath; the army no longer teems. Time comes to a standstill. Part of her wonders if it's Teferi's doing—if she will see him atop the tree, staff in hand. When it comes to Phyrexia, Elspeth knows better than to nurse such hopes.

"Why have we stopped?"

"The time has come," says the woman. A shimmering shape coalesces between Jin-Gitaxias and Koth, his first target. She is a serene-looking woman, her features kind. Still, there is a certain sadness weighing down her shoulders. "I must hear your decision."

"Who are you?" It slips out without her thinking.

"My name hardly matters anymore, but you once knew it," she says. She walks between the prisoners, stopping now at Chandra. The Pyromancer cannot even kneel under her own power—the woman steadies her. "Think carefully. Do you still think Norn must be killed?"

Try as she might, Elspeth cannot imagine the Multiverse at peace so long as Norn lives. "When a limb's gone sour, you have to cut it off," she says.

"Strange. We heard something similar once, didn't we?" the woman says. She moves to Wrenn—kneels to prop her up. The dryad is looking toward the Invasion Tree. "Do you remember, Elspeth?"



Now that she mentions it—it was familiar. Where had she heard that before? She racks her memory, sifting through all that she's seen, until at last the voice comes back to her. *When a branch has gone rotten...*

Wrenn. They'd said the same thing, the two of them, separated by time and place. Just as Elspeth knew what had to be done, so did Wrenn. That must have been why she came here. And if she's looking at the tree...

Something shifts. When she looks on the scene, Norn's gone translucent, like a spirit. So too has Jin-Gitaxias. The more she looks around the more ghosts she sees. Only Nissa and Wrenn remain themselves. Were they the key players? Wrenn must be tied to her earlier revelation—but why Nissa? Beyond their excursion to New Phyrexia, Elspeth hadn't spoken to her much. By the time Elspeth arrived Nissa was already gone.

"We cannot stay here forever," she says. "You must answer."

"I know," Elspeth says. "It's just... give me a moment to think."

Why Nissa?

If it was someone who'd already lost—why not Ajani? Why not repay her old mentor for everything he'd done for her? Maybe there was still a way to save him.

And for that matter, why not take to the field in New Capenna? If she struck down Atraxa, perhaps the angels there could return—and perhaps their returning might cleanse the plane.

As much as she doesn't want to read them, the answers are plain across her heart: if she saves Ajani, she will only be saving a single person. Alone he isn't enough to turn the tide. New Capenna can save itself. Which leaves Wrenn, and Nissa, and the glowing thread tying them together.

Yes—she understands.

The decision isn't whether to save Nissa or to save Wrenn.

It's to keep Nissa occupied long enough for Wrenn to reach the tree.

"You're certain?" the woman asks.

Elspeth nods. Her body feels strange, as if every nerve is alight at once. "This is the right thing to do."

"So it is. I cannot fight this threat alongside you, much as I wish I could. But I can forge you into what you were always meant to be."

Elspeth looks down at her hand, forming itself anew from the ether of this place. Here are her nails, here are her calluses, here are the lines of her palm. Fortune tellers said they could read fate in those lines. She wonders if any of them knew where she'd end up. "I'm afraid," Elspeth





*"Moment of Truth", by Rovina Cai.*

says. Once more it simply slips out of her. She didn't even know she was afraid until she spoke—but she is. There's a numbness creeping into the back of her mind. She thinks of Daxos, of Theros, of the home she once imagined. It all seems like a pleasant dream.

The woman embraces her.

"Fear is always the last thing to leave," the woman says. "You've slain it time and time again. Do not falter now, Elspeth."

It is the last thing she hears before Serra fades away.

What an odd sensation it is to be reborn—to feel yourself being stripped away and changed. The wings on her back are heavy as plate mail, yet she cannot remember a time she was ever without them. This body of hers is different—and yet it is as it has always been. She is Elspeth, and she is not.

There is no more room for indecision. The Multiverse hangs in the balance.

All of her life she has been asleep. It's time to wake up, time to become what she was always meant to be.

Jin-Gitaxias raises his claws.

Elspeth's sword is there to meet them.

# EPISODE VII
# Divine Intervention

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ELSPETH MAKES ELESH NORN BLEED.
CHANDRA AND WRENN MAKE A BREAK FOR IT.

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*Tell her not to follow me. None of you should. Not ever.*

The first time Karn tried to solve Mirrodin's Phyrexian problem, he'd left word behind that he wasn't to be pursued. It was a conscious decision. The corruption was taking hold of him. Mirrodin fell because of Karn. In his arrogance, he'd shaped the world; in his hubris, he'd left one of his own creations in charge of it; in his ignorance, he'd tracked Phyrexian oil throughout the plane. If he'd been more present, he might have realized Memnarch had lost his way. If he'd paid attention, he might have seen the oil dripping in his wake. But he wasn't present, and he wasn't paying attention, and Mirrodin's fall crushed anyone who lived within it. *Don't follow me,* he'd told the others—because all of this was his problem, and solving it was going to kill him.

And he was right. If it wasn't for Venser sacrificing his spark, Karn would be dead. A brilliant inventor, teller of awful jokes, and general thorn in the sides of most who knew him, Venser was part of the group that'd come to find Karn when he was deep in the throes of phyresis. Koth and Elspeth beat back the enemy's legions long enough to buy Venser time to find him deep within Mirrodin's core. Melira had made Venser immune to corruption, and Venser...

Time and time again Karn swore that he'd do honor to Venser's memory. Venser had seen something in him, something worth dying for. If Karn let himself die he'd be betraying that hope.

Which makes his current predicament all the more painful. Lashed to a floating piece of slag held aloft by Norn's choir, made of the same material that had arrested his planeswalking in the Caves of Koilos what felt like years ago, he has the perfect view to the end of the Multiverse. Most of his body has been taken for scrap. Karn used to wonder why he could feel pain. "People are less likely to hurt something that screams," Urza said. What a shame Phyrexians aren't people. Karn's in agony. He has no choice but to embrace it, reshape it, make it something useful: an anchor that will keep him tied to what remains of this body. So long as he can feel that pain, he is himself.

And surrounded by the triumph of his failures, it only feels appropriate.



This is the end—of his creations, of the Multiverse, of him.

Knowing Norn, it won't come quickly. Between Vorinclex's endless taunts and Jin-Gitaxias's prodding, Karn has no illusions about what's going to be done with him. What is being done to him. The Phyrexians have been taking him apart, piece by piece, and repurposing his silver body. Vorinclex and Jin-Gitaxias have different ideas on how best to do that—but the core idea is the same.

And Norn?

Norn wants him to suffer. He sees that in her fang-ridden smile.

"False Patriarch," she says to Karn, "isn't this a blessed sight? After all your years of stumbling, to see the heights we've climbed without you."

Karn does not look at her. Cannot. He has precious little power left within him. With whatever remains, he wants to remember his friends. It is the least he can do for them. Koth sits straight-backed even as Jin-Gitaxias advances toward him. Of the captives, he is the only one to meet Karn's eyes. The others all have their reasons. Chandra is too beaten to kneel upright. And Melira?

Melira can't bear to look, either.

Though his heart aches, he understands. After all that they'd worked toward, all their time struggling against the impossible, the sacrifices and

the dreams, they are all going to die here. Because of his mistakes all that time ago. If he were in her position, he wouldn't want to look, either.

His Mirran would-be rescuers have lost limbs; some are already being spliced into new monstrosities. When they first arrived, there were dozens of them. Now there's only a handful left—Koth, Melira, Wrenn, Chandra, and perhaps ten or twenty survivors. One by one the rest of them had been dragged off for experiments. Those that remain here Norn has kept for her own special reasons.

One of the chorus members extends herself, her spine unfolding like an accordion to accommodate her new growth. She takes Karn's head in hand and holds it in place—forces him to confront Norn's face.

"Phyrexia has posed you a question. You must answer it. It is no wonder you failed to lead us if you cannot do as much as this."

Karn is weary. He cannot think of something to say.

In the end, he does not have to.

Jin-Gitaxias raises an arm to strike. In the gleam of his wicked claws, Karn sees the ghosts of his past. Who better to offer him comfort in a time like this? Soon he will be among them, wherever they might have gone.

Will it hurt?



Will it be like falling asleep? He's always been envious of sleep.

Time to rest.

He closes his eyes—for a flash of gold to blare across his eyelids.

A clarion call shatters the chitter-skitter of Phyrexia's great machine. The gathered forces have only an instant's warning for what is to come—and no idea what it might be. As golden light swallows the onlookers, Karn hears the clashing of metal. And because he was built to function in the strangest environments, he can see what has appeared in the center of the shockwave now rocking the bridge.

An angel in gleaming armor, a golden blade now raised to counter Jin-Gitaxias's strike. She descends from on high like the lance of an angry god toward them—and when she lands, she craters the metal beneath her. Her impact sends dozens of Jin-Gitaxias's legions tumbling into the abyss. The choir's delicate bodies aren't meant for an impact like this, either. Soon they plummet into the dark as well, sending Karn's chunk of slag hurtling to the ground.

Still, he watches.

"You will not strike this man down," says the angel.

Wait. Doesn't he...? That voice...



*"Archangel Elspeth", by Cynthia Sheppard.*



Karn isn't the only one to recognize it. Only an arm's length away, Elesh Norn lets out a keening screech. *"You?!"*

When the light fades, Elspeth Tirel stands in the center of the crater. Yet this is Elspeth as Karn has never seen her: flanked by radiant golden wings. The many wounds of her past no longer mark her serene face.

Jin-Gitaxias scrambles backward, his servitors closing ranks to protect his escape. Elspeth lets him go. She's busy elsewhere—placing a hand on Chandra's swollen face. Healing light flows from her into the pyromancer. Flesh knits back together.

Already Norn has shot up from her throne; in her anger, she's thrown it over. Two of her choir are crushed beneath its bulk. To Karn's eye, their deaths don't seem to have bothered her. "You… you were not meant to trouble us anymore!"

Elspeth does not dignify this with a response, does not look up at her; she keeps her attention on Chandra, then on Koth. The shock on his face is plain to see—but there is hope there, too. That in turn kindles some within Karn. When was the last time he saw hope in those eyes?

"We, the might and heart of Phyrexia, address you!" Norn flings a chunk of her throne at Elspeth. Karn braces himself for Elspeth to come tumbling down—but it doesn't seem to bother Elspeth at all when the rock shatters against her wing.

Something ripples through the assembled ranks of Phyrexia, something like fear, something like shock. Whatever it is, they do not like it. Like animals before fire, they begin to pull back, to scatter. The Mirrans see their chance. The moment Koth's healed, he drives his fist into the ground. Magma shoots up from a burning orange crack in the bridge, running all the way to the base of the Invasion Tree. "Mirrodin!" says Koth. "With me!"

But Norn does not seem to hear them. Whatever she can get a hold of will serve as a weapon, it seems: more chunks of her throne, a horn she snaps from a howling Vorinclex, the severed head of an unlucky choir member. She hurls them all through the air at Elspeth. Elspeth dodges, cuts, and parries—none of the blows land true. Norn screeches again.

Jin-Gitaxias crawls up to Norn's side. "The prisoners—"

"You and Nissa deal with them," Norn snaps ."We have something more important to attend to."

"That angel?" Jin-Gitaxias asks. "Preposterous. She's only one among many. My legions can handle them, and Vorinclex will eat whatever we leave behind. It would be wiser for you to retreat and leave the matter—"

Norn grabs him by the throat. "Dissent is a blasphemy, *praetor*. It does not stain the tongue of the faithful. Our will is Phyrexia's will. See it done."



It is ridiculous that they are having this conversation. Norn must be losing control.

Especially if she does not notice Melira running to Karn's platform. A simple wave to Koth and suddenly, Karn is aloft again. "You're going to be okay," Melira says.

So much of this is hard to believe.

Once, long ago, he almost died on New Phyrexia. It was only the intervention of his friends—Venser, Koth, Elspeth, and Melira—that saved him.

Now nearly all of them are here to save him again, and Venser's spark lends him strength.

*Don't follow me,* he once said to Venser.

But Venser's spark was in him still, and followed him all the way here.

He couldn't give up. Not yet.

...

Wrenn couldn't give up. Not yet.

Though there isn't much of Wrenn left, though their entire fighting force has been reduced to only a few broken survivors, she can't give up.

What does it matter if she no longer has legs? The weight of the world is still on her shoulders.

The angel's arrival isn't a surprise to her, but a confirmation. Anything else would have been unacceptable, because anything else meant they might all die. Of course someone came to save them, and of course it was Elspeth in her new autumn colors. She looks splendid, though there isn't time to appreciate it.

Humans are often distracted by bright, shiny things. She hopes Phyrexians will be the same.

"Chandra," she rasps. "Chandra, we need to go."

Gold dances in the pyromancer's eyes—she's as distracted by the goings-on as the others are. It isn't until Wrenn bites Chandra's sleeve and tugs that she looks down.

"I can't walk anymore. I need your help," says Wrenn.

It's all the explanation Chandra needs. Reality seems to set in for her again. She scoops Wrenn up. "You've got it. Let's go."

Together they take off. The Mirrans follow, looking back every other step toward the woman who's saved them all—and the army they'll have to evade.



At least, that's what Wrenn thought they were admiring. "Karn!" shouts Melira. "We have to save him, too."

"Got it!" says Koth. The slab Karn's on is stone like any other—it answers his call the way wood heeds hers. Karn's slab flies out to meet them. A barrage of arrows and spears bounce off the back of the slab. That's Koth's work too: he's using it to shield their retreat.

Wrenn frowns. The weapons weren't actually hurting Karn, but this still strikes her as a callous thing to do. How long have they been fighting, that they make decisions like this?

They deserve peace.

Wrenn wants to bring it to them, but she won't be able to do it alone. Teferi will know what to do, if only she can reach him. And he's gone somewhere she won't be able to reach without the Invasion Tree's help. She can't reach it without Chandra, and Chandra...

"Drop the dryad and there's still hope for you, Chandra. You're smart enough to know I'll kill you otherwise."

Chandra had Nissa to deal with.

They all do. No matter how fast they run, none of it is going to mean anything if Nissa catches them. And she means to catch them. The elf's flinging the bodies of the fallen back at them, her steps certain and in-

evitable. Wrenn wishes she hadn't turned back to get a look. There's no compassion in those eyes, no mercy, no trace of the woman who was once there.

Koth has his hands full keeping the others from getting hurt. Karn's as torn apart as she is. The fleeing Resistance—they're doing what they can, but what they can do to a Phyrexianized elven Planeswalker isn't much. Elspeth's distracting Norn. And Chandra? Chandra can't bring herself to hurt Nissa. Wrenn knows that without having to ask.

They need to get to the tree. And they will. Wrenn's sure of it, because if they don't everyone will die, and that can't happen.

What she can't see from here is how.

All she has is faith.

...

Phyrexia rages, yet it cannot break Elspeth Tirel's peace. It is a peace as certain and solid as her golden armor, as hard won as her battle scars. Chunk after chunk of porcelain comes flying at her; she does not so much as flinch. These are the desperate actions of a person who knows they are going to lose.

Elspeth is above all that now.



Once, she'd found Norn frightening. Once, those needle-like teeth had haunted her. Norn's uncanny voice narrated her nightmares with a false god's bravado. *Remember always your humility, for it was Phyrexia that brought you low.*

Elspeth does not find her frightening anymore. She's no longer brought low. In fact, with a single flap of her wings, Elspeth can soar above her. From here Norn is more of an oversized doll than a threat to the Multi-



*"Angelic Intervention", by awanqi (Angela Wang).*

verse. Everything seems smaller now. Further away. All of the dross of Elspeth's life has been cut away, leaving only the truth.

And the truth is that Phyrexia will not win this day.

Beneath her, the Mirrans flee toward the tree. Koth covers the retreat with Chandra the vanguard, Wrenn in her arms. Strapped to a hunk of slag is Karn—who watches her with naked admiration. Though he is in a pitiful state she nevertheless finds herself smiling at him. After all these years, they're finally going to put everything right.

So long as Elspeth can see them safely there. She has to stop Nissa. Wrenn has to reach that tree.

But there's a more pressing matter to attend to—someone who definitely doesn't want her running off.

Furious, Norn lunges for Elspeth, claws outstretched. She yanks Elspeth from the air by a dangling leg, and slams her against the ground. "You shall not ruin our moment of triumph!"

Elspeth's ears ring; her vision blurs. She blinks. Norn towers above her once more.

"We have dedicated ourselves to this cause without reservation. The salvation of the Multiverse is our righteous calling. How dare you stand against it?"



"I have my own calling," Elspeth answers. She stands, dust falling from her cloak. "You won't keep me from it."

Norn's laughter is enough to chill the blood. "Your calling is false," she begins. As she speaks, the bodies of the fallen Phyrexians lift and swarm around her. Pieces fly from their limp forms: shards of metal, shards of bone; blades and razors; teeth and tubes. Warp through weft, Norn weaves herself a hideous new suit of armor. "In all of the worlds there is only one eternal, untarnished truth: all will be one. Any who stand in the way of unity stand in the way of a perfect future."

Elspeth looks over her shoulder. The others are fleeing, and Nissa has broken off to stalk toward them. She can't afford to stay here and listen to Norn's grandstanding. Elspeth concentrates on her blade: the crackling, golden Godsend. This is only a facsimile of the real thing—but it's her facsimile. She knows it'll work for her. A little focus is all it takes to send a searing beam of light at Norn. Chunks of armor fall away, incinerated by the sword's purifying rays. A smoking pit rises from the Praetor's shoulder. This time, Norn doesn't scream. Instead she raises a clawed hand. The bodies of the fallen soldiers around them—those already shucked of their useful parts—rise up anew to encircle the two fighters.

"Phyrexia shall never fall," Norn says. "Look around you. There is no death, Elspeth Tirel, only Phyrexia."

She won't have long to act. Before the risen ranks can pin her down, Elspeth takes to the air once more. Yet as she turns toward the fleeing Mirrans, walls shoot up from the ground to block her path—ones that rise to the endless heights of the sanctuary's ceiling.

"You cannot run from us," Norn says. "We are the ground beneath your feet, the air in your lungs. Everything that you lay eyes upon is Phyrexia, and Phyrexia is us. We are whole."

Elspeth strikes at the wall. Sparks are the only sign of progress: the porcelain plating does not yield to her blade. Up ahead, Nissa is closing on the Mirrans. Chandra is with them—the two of them were close, weren't they? Would Chandra be able to strike her down? Elspeth hesitates. If Chandra falters, Nissa will stop them.

They need Elspeth. This fight is a distraction. She needs to get through that wall. If the others can hold out for just a few seconds...

Once more she concentrates on the blade, every breath setting it more brightly aglow. An aurora gleams across her armor. Behind and beneath her, the risen legions of Vorinclex and Jin-Gitaxias are on the attack. Lashes close around her wings. As one, they pull back. Her muscles strain under the pressure.

"Why must you struggle so?" Norn asks. "You've always struggled against us. What is it you desire? If you have longed for a home, find home with



us. If you have need of friends or lovers, there are numberless legions of them among our ranks. You can still join us, if you submit."

Elspeth looks over her shoulder. Norn's standing taller than ever, the added plates from the bridge and the fallen serving to stretch her even further. Bright viscera shines beneath the surface: the flayed flesh of which she's so proud. From the size of her, the cruel shapes of her armor, and the casque-like grill of her new carapace, she looks nothing like home. Elesh Norn is war and death.

A second set of lashes shoots from Norn's outstretched hand. Elspeth doesn't have any other choice: if she wants to stay aloft, she's going to have to get through Norn. A single chop of her blade severs both sets of lashes; momentum topples the Gitaxians onto their backs.

Elspeth flies toward Norn. "You don't understand me."

Another slash comes her way; she dodges and repays Norn with a slice across the arm. Smoke rises from the wound. The smell of burning flesh sticks to the top of Elspeth's mouth. "I'm nothing like you."

Norn grabs one of Elspeth's wings. In a foul parody of a child holding a bird, she dangles Elspeth aloft. "You longed for a purpose—for something greater than yourself. Your dearest heart's desire is a place where you might belong, a place of endless peace, where those you value are never far. A bright future. A *Phyrexian* future."

Norn's voice is joyously sick, and sickly joyous. Elspeth cuts at Norn's grasping fingers, but though she draws blood, the Praetor does not let go.

"What does this form offer you that Phyrexia cannot? Peace. Purpose. Unity. Yet they cannot grant you the last, not in truth. Skin still binds you together. Weakens you. To be Phyrexian is to be free from all such boundaries. What you've gained is a pale imitation of what we've perfected. Look around you!"

She does.

And though she is loath to admit it, there is truth to what Norn is saying. The eyes that stare back at her from the army's ranks are all the same. Those that breathe do so in unison—and with those breaths, the sanctuary clicks and whirrs, a machine keyed to the lives of its denizens. Nissa, Nahiri, Ajani... none of them seemed upset with their new states. On every one of them she'd seen nothing but ecstasy.

Home could be whatever you made it and whoever you made it with. If she joined, she wouldn't be short of friends. She and Ajani could forge Theros into its best possible form. Even Daxos could join them. Undying, ageless, all one—forever.

"Angels are a pale shadow of divinity. We are its true light. From the heights of this sanctum we see all things exactly as they are. After this battle you will no longer exist as your self—you will become one of them.



All those years you looked with horror on phyresis, and here you are, embracing it by another name."

"It isn't the same!" Elspeth answers.

Norn holds Elspeth upside down in front of her. They are eye to porcelain, Elspeth dangling meters over the ground. Norn's teeth gleam with the refracted light from Elspeth's blade. "Then name a single difference."

"My purpose is divine."

"My evangels act as the swords of our divinity. Try again."

"This transformation hasn't changed anything about me." The lie stains her tongue the second she's told it.

"Those new wings of yours tell a different truth. Is this so difficult for you to understand?"

"I..." Elspeth starts.

Another voice from behind—a familiar one. Jin-Gitaxias calls out to his liege. "Haven't we spent enough time on this? Compleat her, and let us be on our way."

"Quiet!" Norn shouts. At once her mood drops to furious rage. She turns toward Jin-Gitaxias.A clash of metal, the sound of tearing flesh. Jin-Gitaxias gurgles behind Elspeth. She realizes he was right: they've

spent enough time bickering like children. Her purpose is greater than this. And Norn's reaction to insubordination tells Elspeth all she needs to know about their differences.

She drives her sword into Norn's wounded shoulder—the only place she can reach from here. A spurt of blood slicks Elspeth's armor as Norn, at last, lets go. Elspeth takes to the air again. Jin-Gitaxias's arm lays in a pool of oil not far from Norn. If she hadn't escaped, it might have been



*"Elspeth's Smite", by Livia Prima.*



hers. Instead, Elspeth concentrates her power on her sword. Golden light floods the platform.

"You're right, Norn," she says. "We aren't so different. We argue. We make mistakes. We have our own wants, dreams, and desires."

Norn's mouth wrenches in confusion and disgust. "What blasphemy is this? We speak only Phyrexia's will—"

Norn swings, but Elspeth ducks out of the way. "You disagreed with Jin-Gitaxias, didn't you? Phyrexia wants you to ignore me, but you want differently."

A shout peels from Norn's throat. Shards of fallen soldiers slice through the air, blades of the dead, each aimed at Elspeth. "You!... You understand nothing of Phyrexia!"

"No, the problem is I understand you far too well," says Elspeth. The blade hums with power. She raises it high overhead. This is it. After all these years and all these dead—it is finally time to strike down Elesh Norn. Jin-Gitaxias will do nothing to help her. Already his legions are charging...

Toward the Tree. Thousands of them for only a handful of Mirrans. Spears land like hail across the bridge's surface. That person crumpling to the ground—is that Melira? Born without a trace of metal in her body,

immune to the horrors of phyresis, the girl once represented hope to the entire plane. Is that her crumpling to the ground?

Koth's scream confirms it.

It is not right to linger.

Elspeth looks down on the Praetor before her. A storm of blades swirl around Norn like the petals of a porcelain flower. "We are beyond your comprehension, beyond your reach! When we have conquered the Multiverse you've held so dear you will kneel at our feet and bask in the glory of our creation! You will not ruin everything we've achieved. Eons from now you will be forgotten, and we will remain the eternal hierophant, Elesh Norn!"

"That's just what I mean. You want people to worship *Elesh Norn,* don't you? Phyrexia doesn't matter to you. It never has. Power's the only thing you care about."

The swords around Elesh Norn hang still and silent. A sanguine glow of rage builds from behind them. "You... *I* hate you!" Like the arrows of an army, the swords flying toward her—shards pulled now from the bridge, from the walls, from the very body of Phyrexia.

So she's finally learned to speak for herself, has she? Well, that's no longer Elspeth's concern. The swords, however...

Only one shot at this. If Elspeth aligns everything right...



She flies straight for the wall. At the very last moment she pulls back. Momentum turns her stomach, holds her in a vise, but she makes the turn up and away. The blades don't have the space. With all of her problems concentrated in one place, Elspeth at last unleashes a ray of light.

When the light fades, she's already halfway down the bridge, toward the Tree. The hopes of the Multiverse rest on her plumed shoulders.

She does not hear Jin-Gitaxias get to his feet—but she does hear Norn's scream.

"Come back here! I wasn't finished with you!"

She's dawdled too long. It is time to do the right thing.

Wrenn and Chandra are almost to the tree. Elspeth's got to make sure they make it.

# EPISODE VIII
# Wrenn and Eight

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WRENN MAKES A NEW FRIEND,
AND FINDS AN OLD ALLY.

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Wrenn used to think that no matter where she went, she'd always be home. Hard to argue otherwise for dryads. So often home meant a tree they'd never leave. For her, things are a little more complicated: the trees with which she's bonded cannot survive the process for long, and she herself has matters to attend to all over the Multiverse. But she remained convinced that—no matter where in the Multiverse she ended up—she'd never be far from another place to live.

Until she arrived on New Phyrexia. In all her days she could never have imagined a place like this, scoured of all natural life; at once deathly quiet and filled with the artificial chittering of machines. If you asked any dryad to imagine their worst nightmare, they'd speak of a place like this. Wrenn hates it here.

And she hates, most of all, that this is where she's going to die.

It isn't dying that scares her. Unlike Chandra, who carries Wrenn's frail head and torso toward the Invasion Tree, Wrenn isn't afraid of the spears and barbs the Phyrexians unleash in their direction. The gouts of flame and molten ore that fire over her shoulder—some from Chandra, some from Koth—do not frighten her either. If anything, she wishes that she could join them, but she hardly has the strength to keep the fires inside of herself at bay. Using them against others would jeopardize everything they've come here to do.

*That* is what truly frightens Wrenn: the possibility that she may not be able to do what everyone is relying upon her to do. The Invasion Tree does not sing to her anymore. He hasn't said a word the entire time she's been here—not even earlier, when she nearly managed to graft herself onto him. If it rejects her then they have no way of controlling him, no way of reaching Teferi, no way of stopping this onslaught.

And they will need Teferi if they are to stop any of this. Of that, Wrenn is certain.

From here, jostling with each step, she can see the coming onslaught: thousands of Phyrexians, with thousands more being assembled on the spot. Metal shines on each—not in the way of a knight's gallant armor, but in the way of churning forges and shining needles. And though there are more eyes staring back at her then there are leaves in a forest, she sees no life in any of them.



"This place should not exist," she says.

"Tell me about it," Chandra incinerates a spear before it can hit them. "We just have to hold on a little longer." Her breathing is ragged, her steps uneven; she's struggling to hold Wrenn up. Wrenn wasn't certain Chandra would ever walk again after the fall they took. Human bodies are delicate things. Nissa's vines caught them before they splattered against the ground—but sometimes the fall itself was bad, no matter how you landed. Yet Chandra stands and fights no matter how much pain she must be in.

"Are you in need of mending?" Wrenn asks.

"I'm fine," is the Pyromancer's sharp response.

A rain of needles comes toward them—Koth levitates the metal beneath their feet to a shield over their heads. Needles spark as they bounce off its surface, some find new homes in the backs of Mirrans that Koth couldn't cover. He curses, the sound like quenching a blade. "Can't keep this up forever!"

"It won't be forever," Chandra says. "Once Wrenn's at the tree, everything will be fine."

Except that it will take time to graft onto the tree, to speak with it, to search for her old friend. And that's supposing she's able to do any of that at all. Will this body of hers hold out long enough? There is so little

left of her. Chandra is clutching her like a wayward pet. In the face of the Invasion Tree's mighty form she is less than an acorn. If there were others, if she had her sisters with her, maybe...

A scream tears her from her thoughts. Wrenn comes back into reality and sees a sharp tendril shoot through the air over Chandra's shoulder. The scream's coming from up ahead—the other end of the tendril's gone clean through Melira's stomach.

"You should have taken our offer," comes a familiar voice. Nissa. A barbed vine slices straight toward them.

Chandra sucks in a breath. The fireball she sends back at Nissa flickers and fades midway through. She curses, and, in an act of desperation, rolls to avoid impact. Barbs pierce the ground like spears—standing just as tall as any of the warriors. If one of those had pierced them...

"Got your back!" Koth shouts. He flings a craggy boulder at Nissa. One of her slicing vines splits it in two, then throws both halves back at the Rebels.

Chandra burns one in midair, groaning with the effort. Her shaky breathing's becoming a rattle. Wrenn wishes there was more she could do to help—but staying awake and keeping herself alive will have to do.

A couple dozen Mirrans are all that remains of the fighting force, and the only ones in the way of Nissa's unstoppable charge. As Chandra makes



a break for the tree, Koth, Melira, and the others cover their escape. Hard enough when it was only Phyrexian soldiers with which they had to contend—near impossible in the face of a killing machine like Nissa. Vines and blades alike slice through flesh as easily as paper.

"Koth!" shouts Melira. Blood spills like sap into the hand she's using to cup her wound. "Koth, we need a barricade!"

He glances over toward her. Even Wrenn can read the concern on his face. "Coming up. Chandra, you're going to have to bolt."

"Got it!"

Koth drives a fist into the platform. Orange flares throughout his form. Metal groans up and grows, forming a barrier to stop Nissa's approach.

But it's not done growing, yet, and Nissa isn't going to take this lightly.

She stalks toward them, lifted high above the surface of the bridge on a tangle of cable-like roots. Copper branches pierce the bodies of those that stand before her—Phyrexian and Mirran alike. A single one of her steps is three of anyone else's. Though Chandra is running as fast as she can, there's no way that she'll be able to evade all of Nissa's questing strikes.

If Chandra wanted, she could melt those roots in place. Send her crumpling to the ground. But Chandra hadn't looked over her shoulder since Nissa appeared.

"You don't want to hurt her, do you?" Wrenn asks.

Chandra says nothing.

"I understand. It's difficult, with friends. But you aren't really hurting her. I'm certain she'd never want to hurt you—so isn't keeping her from doing that exactly what she'd want you to do?"

Chandra clenches her jaw. "Wrenn."

"Yes?"

"It isn't that—"

Before Chandra can finish, she's torn backward. Wrenn tumbles from her grip, landing on the cold metal bridge in time to see Chandra dangling high above, Nissa lifting her by the ankle with a long and brassy root. One of the Mirrans catches Wrenn and keeps running.

"Get her to the tree. Keep her moving!" Koth shouts. He, too, has turned his attention to fighting off Nissa.

This Mirran only gets a few steps further before one of Nissa's spears nails them in place. They hurl Wrenn through the air. Two of his comrades look on in horror—but a third has the presence of mind to catch Wrenn and keep her going.



From hand to hand she passes, tossed through the air to keep her out of Phyrexian clutches. The Phyrexians think humans know little of unity—but Wrenn knows otherwise.

By the time she makes it to Melira's arms, Wrenn's nearly to the Invasion Tree.

And Chandra's still in the air.

"Still with us?" Melira rasps.



*"Storm the Seedcore", by Jason Rainville.*

"I am, but..." Wrenn says. "I can't—I can't do this on my own, I need Chandra's help—"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think you're going to get it," says Melira. How is she running, wounded as she is? A pang of guilt shoots through the dryad. There's too much resting on this to stop, but...

*"We told you,"* says Nissa. Her booming voice carries all the way up to the platform. "We warned you this would never work!"

Vines wrap about Chandra's throat. Wrenn feels them, too, as Melira helps her up onto the observation platform.

Higher and higher Chandra goes, writhing and fighting, her body swinging. How long can humans go without breathing?

"How do I set you up with this tree?" Melira asks.

Below them, Koth and dozens of Mirrans hold off the rest of the Phyrexian army at the barricades. Nissa might have been able to walk straight over it—but the others will have to go the hard way. Soldiers climb to the top of the barricade and hurl recovered quills back at the teeming Phyrexian army. Some are plucked right from their positions, taken screaming into the mass of metal and oil on the other side of the barricade.

Still they fight.



Wrenn's tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth. "...Just leave me by it, but I need help with the fire—"

"I'm sorry, that's more than I can do," says Melira. She picks Wrenn up and places the gnarled roots of her waist against the tree. "But I can help you with this, at least a little."

Before Wrenn can ask what she means, magic ebbs from Melira's hand, glowing a faint white. Strength seeps into Wrenn's bark as the glow fades—but not just strength. Something about this feels as crisp as rain, as vital as sun.

Melira is woozy on her feet. What she's done seems to have taken a lot out of her. She sinks to her knees, then sits, her back against Realmbreaker's white plating. "Should... should help, a bit..."

Wrenn wants to ask Koth if he'll go save Chandra. She wants to join with any tree but this, wants to hold onto herself just a little longer. She wants to help Melira, though she doesn't know how she'd even start.

But at times like these, it's hard to get what you want.

She closes her eyes as her roots meld into the Invasion Tree. No—he has another name, one he prefers, and it'd be rude of her not to use it. Realmbreaker. Sickness floods her senses. Oil roils over her roots, swirl-

ing with evil. No song fills her, no call of the forest, only an insistence that she does not belong.

She doesn't. But no matter what Realmbreaker says, she's going to stay.

Deep in the sylvan recess of her heart, Wrenn begins to sing. Of Innistrad's storied oaks, of the floating pines of Zendikar, of maple, yew, and beech she sings. Louder and louder the staggered chant of Realmbreaker: *you do not belong*. Something within twists, then begins to pull.

Wrenn yelps. She rakes her fingers against the plating, unwilling to yield, not now. Pressure's building up within the hollow of her chest—the fire is all too eager to fight the tree's ill intent. It's searing the inside of her throat. If she gives into it, the fire might well buy her enough time to fully meld with the tree—if it doesn't consume her first.

But that won't work. There's too much hunger. The fire, Realmbreaker—there is hunger on both sides, and she dangles between the two predators.

All of this is starting to hurt.

Chandra would know what to do. She could speak fire. Calm it down, direct it, tell it where it needs to go, keep it from burning Wrenn as it burned Realmbreaker.

But Chandra dangles above the bridge, and she too is about to die here, and there will be no one else to help.



Wrenn clenches her jaw tight. *You can burn, but only the things that aren't me,* she thinks. Chandra said thinking at it might help.

A flare within her belly, the smell of burning oak. The thousand voices within Realmbreaker scream at once—but so, too, does Wrenn. How is the fire meant to tell the two apart? They are one and the same, now. Already Realmbreaker's foulest thoughts echo within her own mind: they must spread, they must claim what is already claimed, they must wake the world to the glories of New Phyrexia. Like a fungus gone mad they continue their shouting even as the fire consumes them.

Even as it consumes her.

Flames lick at her eyes.

Wrenn opens them.

There is something behind Nissa. Something in white.

Gold flashes across her vision, so bright she mistakes it at first for the fire—but it soon fades. At the center is Nissa. The light's exploding from her mouth and eyes, the metal roots armoring her have gone white-hot. The blow staggers her—she drops Chandra.

What was...? Ah, she sees it now—the angel catches Chandra and sets her on the platform.

"Wrenn!" shouts Chandra, choking and rasping. "Are you still in there?"

"I-I am," Wrenn says. Realmbreaker is trying to convince her that there is no Wrenn—but she knows that's a lie. So long as the Multiverse is still in danger, there is still a Wrenn.

Chandra hacks and coughs—but she lays her hand on Wrenn's shoulder all the same. Wrenn can hear her breathing, even if her vision is starting to fade. "You're doing such a good job, Wrenn."

Is she? Parts of her are starting to flicker to ash.

"Do you remember what we talked about back on Dominaria?"

Chandra's voice echoes in Wrenn's head. The world starts to go hazy around them, spinning like a leaf on the wind. People are screaming. Someone's hurt. There's a war going on only a few yards away, and... What was it Chandra said back then?

"Like... breathing...?"

Behind her seared-shut eyes, the colors start to swirl: gold, red, green.

"That isn't helpful right now," Chandra says. She lays her hand on Wrenn's shoulder. Warmth blossoms in Wrenn's mind. Instead of lingering within Wrenn, the fires now flow from Realmbreaker to Chandra, stopping only briefly in between. "Fire's going to burn, no matter what you do, but you can shape it if you try."



It's easier to think without the fire in the way. Wrenn can focus on something more than the pain. She must shape the fire. It's a living thing, just like her roots. Like any growing sprout, it needs guidance.

The landscape in her mind changes. Colors take shape: a twisting tree sprouts from red and gold, its branches burnished copper. An unseen wind stirs its leaves. Slowly, they are falling away, fading as they spiral. An endless lake of black oil surrounds the glowing tree. Bubbles rise and burst across its surface, each one a voice, each one pleading for Wrenn to join them.

But she won't. Not yet.

Within the boughs of her imagined tree is a girl. As she begins to sing, fire flows from her lips, spilling out into the black void in search of someone who will hear it. For what feels an eternity the song floats through the dark until—at last, impossibly—it hears something.

Wrenn hears something.

Faint, fading, the barest whisper of green against the darkness—but it is there.

"...You can do this..." Chandra's voice echoes.

The battle echoes, too. The crunch of metal on bone; Koth's shouted orders; the rumbling impact of some unseen munitions.

She has to focus—to tune it all out.

Wrenn sends her fires out. Normally, she'd let any sapling so shy take its time. Trees needed to come into their own. A dryad's job was to look after that process, to make them the best they could be. Finding this poor little soul now—grafting herself onto him—goes against everything she knows.

She hopes that he will understand.

The fires quest ever forward in search of that furtive trace of green. Black encroaches on the roots of the tree—but still the girl sings, still she searches, still she hopes the distant song will return.

There: a sapling no larger than her hand, struggling against the dark.

How lonely this delicate creation! How long has he been here in the dark? Cursed spots line its edges; what green remains is pale as seafoam. This is not a place meant for the living.

As her mind reaches for him—as his song fills her ears—she shapes the fires once more. An incandescent forest springs from the oil, the burning path leading straight to the sapling. All around them the oil begins to bubble, to churn.





*"Wrenn's Resolve", by Viko Menezes.*

*Join us. Bark that never breaks, leaves that never shed, a fire that never burns itself out—join us, and you will be eternal.*

But Wrenn does not want to. And the sapling doesn't, either, his song going shrill with fear.

Chandra said the trick was to shape the fire. Very well—Wrenn will take a cue from the Mirrans outside. Just as they protect her, she will protect this sapling until she can sing him fully grown.

Flaming trees grow to the size of mountains, their branches interlocking like the shields of Koth's constructs. Waves of black oil thrash against them—but the trees flare bright, and the oil rolls off their sizzling surface. All the while Wrenn's flames dance about the sapling, all the while she sings with her faltering voice.

*Grow,* she wills. *For all of us.*

And though the sapling was shy, he knows now—surrounded by his larger fellows—that he is safe. Wrenn's song is a dry log upon the bonfire: he grows tall, tall, impossibly so; his song becomes a booming chant, a warrior's chant; his branches thick as boulders.

How handsome he's become. Happiness wells up within her. She feels herself smile, although she isn't certain how; her body is distant and cold. Only the fires here give her any warmth. But what will they do once those fires have burned themselves out? Wrenn doesn't know. But she does know she's got a fine new partner.

*Hello, Eight,* she says. *Let's introduce you to Teferi.*

...

Eight knows he doesn't have long. The same fires that protect him will soon engulf them both. With her other hosts she'd learned all sorts of



things about them—which waters they favored, how the sun felt against their leaves—but with Eight, there's only room for one thing.

Letting him grow.

Perched on his branches, Wrenn shoots through the dark like a star through a moonless sky. A hundred years of growth, two, three, happen in the span of seconds. Had she a stomach it'd be lost somewhere in the rising tides of black oil beneath them. The higher they go the worse pain she's in—but she holds on tight, all the same.

The others said Eight was the kind of tree who bridged whole planes together. At first, Wrenn wasn't certain how she'd guide him on her own. She sees now that there was no need for worry. He wants to grow. All he needs is the power that she lends him.

Fires churning in his belly, Eight reaches for new worlds. His branches grow, splitting here and there, each its own pathway. Something in the dark gives, and soon he's torn holes all around them. Wrenn can't count them all—it is as if she has stepped within the eye of an insect. Where there was once darkness there is now a kaleidoscope of light.

Everywhere her gaze lands there is something to tantalize it: a castle assailed on all sides by gilded oaks; a gleaming, towering city of chrome on the verge of collapse; a world where trees and rocks and rivers explode with the beautiful, brutal energy of life. She sees a temple in flames, a sun

that consumes all it touches, a river that flows blood red with the oil of its sailors. And yet across all these disparate worlds there is some unity: crimson skies, Phyrexian symbols, nature contorting against itself. What people she sees are always in the thick of a fight. Skulls crumble beneath mechanical legs. Soldiers have their heads dunked into vats of black oil. Blood drips from the mouths of those who will take up arms rather than surrender their homes.

Chandra said this affected every world—but seeing it like this, all laid out before Wrenn's eyes, is a different story.

*They need our help,* Eight says.

*We have to find what they haven't,* Wrenn answers.

*I only know the places they've seen. The places they've made me go.*

*I know a hidden place. But to find it, we have to get a little lost.*

Eight feels nervous below her. Wrenn runs a hand over his bark, embers trailing in the wake of her fingertips. *Don't worry. We'll be together.*

These eyes of hers are not eyes; this body of hers is not a body. She can shed them if she wishes, if they slow her—and so she does. Vision will not help when it comes to getting lost; it'll only get in the way. The tangles of Teferi's magic aren't visible to the naked eye. You must feel them—feel your growth stuttering, or shooting faster, your leaves going



still, your flames at last held in place. The light of a thousand planes bears down on Wrenn, but she pays them no mind, guiding Eight ever upward, ever searching. As a weaver before a loom she guides his many branches: here a rise, there a fall; here a loop, there an enclosure. To think about any of it will set the whole thing awry. There is a place somewhere here out of sight. There is a place that time cannot touch. There is a place no one would ever think to look, a place found if only she can trace the clumsy trail of a friend...

*There.*

Vision returns as the flames roar within her. They've found the right place: the sky is blue as a sapling's dream; the people, though armored, show no signs of fear; the rivers flow green; the trees bear the fruits of kind treatment. Beneath one such tree she sees a gathered throng of people. On gently shaped stone they sit, the clothing draped across their forms bright as jewels, their skin warmed by the sun. Among them are mages and warriors, scholars and diplomats, a Queen and half a dozen farmers. In their strong voices, they give thanks to all that has come before them—to the seas, the sky, and to the grand tree who has weathered so much.

Among them—standing at the Queen's side—is Teferi. There is an ease to him here she's never seen before, a calm that's overtaken him. Wrenn hates to ruin her friend's happiness—but this can't wait. He'll understand.

With a thought she calls to Eight, and Eight is quick to answer. A questing branch opens a tear into this tangled bramble. Quick as its creator the tear grows into something greater: a portal big enough for someone to walk through.

Wrenn can't walk. She doesn't have legs in either this ephemeral flame form or the physical one, grafted onto Realmbreaker back on New Phyrexia. Eight can't walk. He's the soul of the tree, after all; if he leaves, the



*"Transcendant Message", by Liiga Smilshkalne.*



whole thing will fall apart. Her only hope is to call out and hope the others notice what's happened.

"Teferi!"

The clatter of arms taken up, the hum of spells, the whisper of sandals against the earth. They've noticed. Wonder makes its home in the observers—with dashes of caution and bravery. All faces turn toward the Queen and the man at her side. She, for her part, errs on the side of caution. "Who are you, efreet?"

But Teferi lays a comforting hand on the Queen's shoulder. "She's a friend of mine." He walks down the steps, stopping at the bottom to look back toward the Queen. "We might not have much time to finish preparations."

"Bold of you to assume there's a threat we cannot face," the Queen answers. Her expression goes warm. Wrenn feels a pang of guilt. The Queen can't know what it is they're facing—but Wrenn must hope their help will be enough.

"Wrenn, you found me," Teferi says as he approaches the portal. The kindness and charm he wore around his companions fades a little. Wrenn's not good with faces, but even she knows concern when she sees it. "...I don't think we have time for reminiscing, do we?"

Something in her chest goes tight. Is it so obvious? She shakes her head. “No. I’m sorry, we don’t. It... Finding you was...”

“You don’t have to explain,” Teferi says. “Just tell me what I can do to help.”

For a second, she isn’t there anymore—she’s somewhere cold and dark and empty. When she returns, her chest feels even tighter. “We need you on New Phyrexia. Everyone’s fighting back, but there are so many of them and so few of us. Any second now they’re going to overtake us. We need a great hero.”

She can see herself reflected in Teferi’s eyes—all flame, no real body. It frightens her to think that she has no body, no solidity now, but a lot of things frighten her, and she isn’t yet done.

“A great hero? I happen to be looking at one,” he says. “It took me decades to find this place, and you’ve done it in no time at all.”

“Please,” Wrenn creaks. Those words don’t feel like they’re suited to her. “Teferi, there isn’t time.”

He nods in understanding. He reaches for her shoulder, only to draw it back when he remembers there are only flames to meet him. He turns toward the others—

Again she winks out of existence, again it is cold and dark and—



A thousand scabbards strapped to a thousand waists, a thousand spears rattling with movement, boots on the lush earth, war chants in the air—The tightness jumps up to her throat. An entire army had amassed that time. Thousands of them. She’d just been talking with Teferi, and... When had all these people arrived?

How long does she still have?

Not long enough. Not long enough at all.

Wrenn presses her eyes shut. Think. If there won’t be much left of her to physically join the fight, she must do whatever she can to help. And if the Phyrexians brought numbers—well, there were numbers here. Not so many as the enemy, but their bravery shone bright as their armor. Teferi’s people could help. If she could bring them to the fight, that is.

But that would be a mess. This place is hidden within the boughs of the tree itself. Letting Teferi slip through is easy enough—he was only a single leaf. The rest of the army would be a mess of vines springing out, tangling themselves among all the disparate planes she’d seen.

And it occurs to her then, as Teferi turns toward her, just what it is she has to do.

You undo a tangle by moving through it. She and Eight could do the same here—if they tried, they could push the planes toward one anoth-

er until New Phyrexia gave, and then leave this one in its place. Wrenn doesn't know where it'll go. Eight doesn't seem to either—all he offers is that it's some place dark, some place that isn't a place at all.

And the two of them won't have long afterward.

*I'm all right with that,* Wrenn says. *At least we'll have each other.*

Warmth from Eight. He's all right with it, too.

Teferi takes a step toward them—toward the portal.

"Wait," she says. "Don't come alone. Bring your friends."

"Wrenn, the effort it'd take to do that—" he starts, but she can't bear to do this if someone is going to tell her to stop.

"I know. But I want to do it. Please, bring as many as you can. I'll find some other way to live."

Teferi does not answer—but his friends do. The warriors close ranks behind him like petals, their shields overlapping. Mages fill the spaces behind, and—

Cold, dark, a place that isn't a place—

Longer this time. Too long. This is going to be the last time, isn't it?



Teferi's sent out the call. Thousands have answered, ready to rush into New Phyrexia while the two share space. All because she reached out to him again. No matter what else her life has been—she is proud of this.

"It was so nice to meet you, Teferi. I hope whatever remains of me will remember," she says.

Teferi's smile only makes it hurt worse. "Whatever remains of me will always remember my friend, Wrenn," he says. "A hero whose name precedes her."

Cold on the edges of her vision, darkness licking at her limbs. At least it won't be New Phyrexia. She's happier dying here, with one limb in Zhalfir.

Wrenn closes her eyes and does what she does best: she grows.

...

The portal that springs up before the gathered warriors of Zhalfir would put a mountain to shame. Wreathed in flame, yet smooth as the surface of a lake, it is a thing of beauty—yet the images reflected within are anything but. On the other side there is only metal, only blood, only the slick black oil of New Phyrexia. There are only a handful of people left behind a makeshift barricade: a man at the gates, fighting a numberless army with whatever he can find, a woman slumped near a tree and a pyromancer at her side, fighters hurling stones for want of better weapons.



*"Wrenn and Realmbreaker", by Cristi Balanescu.*



A golden angel beats back the Grand Praetor—but even her heavenly blade has grown weary.

A war engine rolls to the walls. A single blow will see it toppled.

In truth, they needn't even make the blow. The monstrosity flings the angel through the gate—and the force of this alone is enough to shatter them.

The gathered armies of New Phyrexia pour through the gate and freeze, in confusion and horror. Ahead of them is a portal to a place lush and verdant, cultivated by careful hands and attentive hearts. It is a thing that horrifies them. So, too, do the warriors who cross over the portal, and the mage who stands at the vanguard.

It has been many years since they were called to war—but Zhalfir stands ready.

# EPISODE IX
# The Old Sins of New Phyrexia

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ON NEW PHYREXIA AND BEYOND,
THE FATE OF THE MULTIVERSE IS DECIDED.

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Centuries ago, the angels staved off the oil of unlife on New Capenna. For centuries, the people on New Capenna have been safe from the encroachment of the enemy. They lent this knowledge of the enemy to their sisters on other planes—thus, the Multiverse remained vigilant about the coming threat. It was good.

It is no longer enough. Their safeguards have failed.

Now, the Multiverse cries out for help.

Another angel—corrupted and dark—has come to New Capenna to reap the rewards sown by its people's sin. She cuts her way through the city's defenses as a farmer threshing wheat. Buildings that stood for generations collapsed in moments; glass and blood line the gutters; war machines rumble through streets that once bustled with cars.

Stone springs to life. Angels that have waited centuries to serve again hear the clarion call to battle. What have they waited for, if not this? Radiant weapons slice through the hulls of towering monstrosities. Wings shield those fleeing from the porcelain onslaught of the enemy. For hours they lend their strength. Those shattered by Phyrexian weaponry dematerialize at the last—as Halo, that glimmering angelic essence, they may still serve.

But Phyrexia's armies are teeming ten thousand, and there are far fewer angels on New Capenna than there once were.

Fortunate that they are not its only protectors.

Where angels beat back the enemy and shield the Capennan forces, there are demons and devils to take the offensive. Here a seraph infuses a tower with Halo; there, a demon severs the heads of those climbing it. Few things are more repugnant than demons, and there will be a price for all this later—but it is a price the angels of New Capenna are willing to pay if it keeps their charges safe.

The youngest among those angels, Giada, wants to help. But she's too small to join the melee, too newly formed for the battlefront. All she can do is watch from the towers and shout to the others where they're most needed. Despite this, she can't help but feel there's something she's missing.



She's certain she'll know it when she sees it. Angels are all about certainty, her older siblings told her.

Deeper into the city goes Atraxa, her army in her wake. The intricate workings of Park Heights do not impede the swing of her scythe.

Riveteers slicked with sweat hide in whatever rafters they can find. Their quick hands disassemble the work of their forefathers. Tools used to forge connections are now used to sever them violently in gouts of flame.

The corrupted angel does not see them at this work—they are too small, too many, too disparate. They are beneath her notice.

In the end, that is her undoing.

An explosion rips through the structures of the city. Deep within the structure of the Mezzio as she is, she does not notice that it's begun to topple until it's already too late. In the end it is not the shield of the angels that kills her, nor the machinations of the demons: it is the city itself. The gleaming glass-and-steel tower of New Capenna collapses atop her, cut free from its mighty pylons and suspension systems. From their perch the angels watch centuries of mortal work crash into the earth.

Giada's essence fizzes with excitement, but it isn't yet right for her to intervene. There's someone she's waiting to hear from.

The others waste no time. The defenses of New Capenna must not be confined to the city alone. If the Multiverse is to survive, the angels must watch over it and fight against Phyrexia with all they have.

Atraxa's death has changed New Phyrexia—and the Invasion Tree is changing with it. The angels feel it as the mortals might feel the earth trembling beneath their feet. The barbs are retracting back to their home, leaving the pathway open for attack.

Their view of New Phyrexia beyond the portals changes to a view of somewhere else—a place with a wine-dark sea, a place where the sky shimmers with the beliefs of its people. And though there are no angels on Theros, they can't deny it's desperately in need of help. To do the just thing without regard for your own safety, to see beyond the needs of the few: this is what it means to guard the Multiverse.

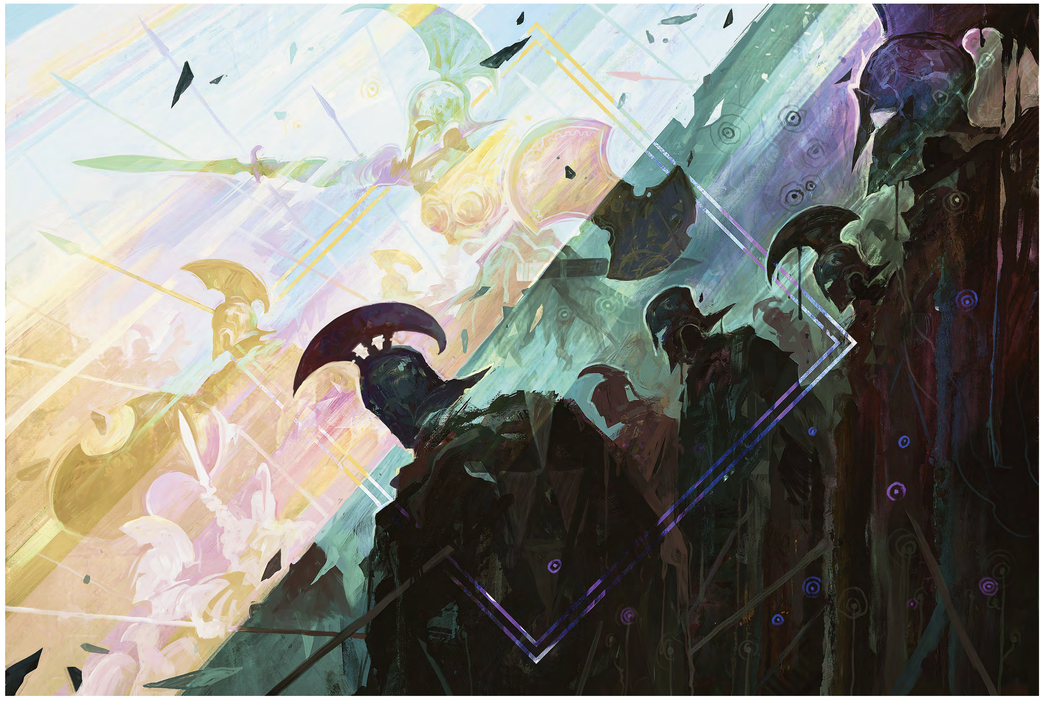
Giada grins. This is the start of things—the start of what she's been waiting for. She hurriedly shouts at the others: *this is where we're needed, this is where we've got to go! Help them out if you can!*

Angels soar through the air, hurtling at unimaginable speed toward the portal. On the other side they burst high above the sea. The angels displaced in this way feel no fear, no hesitation, no regret—they simply do as they've always done.

They protect.



Like motes of dust they travel the winds toward their destination. Some wrap about the throat of a thrashing sea monster, holding it in place long enough for a crew of sailors to sever its heads. Others make their way to temples. The gods who call it home matter not; supplicants in need of protection soon find it. The black oil smeared across a fleeing woman's arm miraculously avoids her wounds; a javelin thrower turns the second before he would have found himself skewered.



*"Surge of Salvation", by Dominik Mayer.*

There is one god who notices their arrival. Bright as the morning sun the befouled Heliod shines, the ethereal angels threatening to burn within his sight. Yet they venture closer, and closer, and closer, for clambering up behind him is a woman who needs help as much as she hates asking for it. So distracted is the god that he does not notice Kaya's violet-wreathed form upon his corrupted carapace. When at last she drives a dagger into his throat—well, the angels see to it that the spray of black oil never touches her. As the god fades, the woman lands once more on the temple. Ajani is there to meet her—but what does a godkiller have to fear from a mere mortal?

Giada's formless heart beats faster. Every step is a step closer to her old friend.

Once more the portals of New Capenna shift, this time to myriad worlds, some new to the angels, some familiar—all in the desperate throes of a fight they cannot win alone. Good thing they are no longer alone.

*"Charge!"* Giada shouts.

Warhorns echo throughout New Capenna, and the angels spread where they are needed most. On planes where they are worshipped, on planes where they are hated, on planes where they are completely unknown—they do what they have always done.



When at last the portals turn to New Phyrexia, Giada knows precisely what to do. The moment has finally arrived. There in plain view is Elspeth Tirel.

*I'm so happy to see you,* she calls.

Elspeth Tirel is too busy to do more than glance toward the portal: there are thousands of Phyrexians charging the platform before her. Fighting takes most of her attention. Even so, when her gaze skims toward the surface, there's a small smile on her lips. *Giada. I'm happy to see you, too.*

She's already learned to speak the proper way, hasn't she? It warms Giada's spirit to see Elspeth shining so brightly. *You've done so well.*

*Thank you,* Elspeth answers. She drives her sword through a winged blade-serpent, splitting it down the center. *But there's still work to be done.*

*That's just what I wanted to tell you. Some of us are coming to help.*

The serpent falls to the ground, but Elspeth remains in flight. A copper vine wraps around her sword arm. She severs it with a weighty chop. *Whatever aid you can send, I'll accept gladly.*

Giada remembers what it is like to grin. Though she cannot in this form, she feels it in her spirit.

She readies another call.

Those who go to New Phyrexia will not return. It is a small price to pay. Someone must watch over them—someone must stanch the bleeding.

*"Charge!"*

...

On Dominaria it was often said that Zhalfirins did not know fear, but the Zhalfirins said otherwise. So far as they were concerned, they knew fear better than anyone else. You could find fear sitting by the fires near nightfall. Every parent who sent a child to war chatted with fear in the mornings and at night. Fear was with you when you surveyed your fields and wondered if there'd be enough for the coming season. The truth of the matter is this: when you know fear and invite fear into your house, when you treat fear as you'd treat anyone else, fear can no longer frighten you. Your community will look after your fears, and you will look after theirs.

The Multiverse is afraid of New Phyrexia.

Very well. Let Zhalfir look after that.

Armed to the teeth, smiling and eager as they face the enemy—the warclans are only too happy to meet the Phyrexians. As Koth's barricade comes tumbling down, the Zhalfirins charge ahead. Teferi catches Koth staring down at them with confusion. "Wait, where'd you come from? What's going on?"





*"Invasion of New Phyrexia", by Chris Rallis.*

Teferi smiles at him. Pride swells in his chest. "Zhalfir. Wrenn found us. We're here to help." All around them the ceiling is starting to crumble, the ground is atremble. Teferi isn't bothered. "The two planes are swapping places—New Phyrexia's being flung out into the abyss, and Zhalfir is... finally coming home. She will welcome you and yours, if you let her."

Koth looks out onto the gathered forces. His expression is hard to read—determination, relief, and sorrow all carve their marks upon his iron. "Then let's make sure Phyrexia never forgets us. Mirrans, make your marks!"

There aren't many Mirrans left—but those who can fight are only too happy to join the charge.

A veil of multicolored light settles over the army's vibrant garments like the blessing of a distant god. Power prickles along their skin. They know what danger the black oil presents them. They know how to counter it. Lances pierce Phyrexian serpents and nail them to the platform's surface; hurled stones crush them underfoot. Rains of fire melt the enemy in place; breath of ice makes them brittle; the blow of a great hammer shatters them into hundreds of pieces.

For years, Zhalfir has awaited the chance to prove their mettle against these argent slags. Now that they are in the thick of the fight there is a prideful joy in the air. Sidars start their chants, calls and responses echoing along from the mouths of Askari, Akinji, and Altali:

"You cannot break—"

"—what is woven together!"

Bravado is as potent as any armor. After only minutes on the field, the Zhalfirins drive a wedge into the Phyrexian army's forces, while their healers tend to the wounded Mirrans on the platform. At the vanguard rides Teferi, his staff aglow, magic swirling about him. The spears that fly through the air, the bladed insect swarms, the shards of the dead blown asunder—all slow as they near him. His companions snatch weapons



from the air and hurl them back at their owners. And though Teferi's rarely known exertion such as this, he meets it with a glad heart and centuries of skill.

Rushing to catch up with him are the other Mirrans—those that can still fight. Chandra points him out to Koth. "You see? That's him! That's Teferi! I told you he was—"

She's cut off when the praetor Vorinclex leaps toward Teferi's vanguard. A moment of hesitation stops Chandra's breath, but Vorinclex does not get far before he hits the wall of Teferi's magic. Everyone—no matter how fearsome—looks foolish moving in slow motion.

Even Koth breaks into a smile at the sight. "All right. Maybe you were onto something." But he, too, is busy. Koth drives both fists into the ground. Two cracks spread out toward the Zhalfirins, one on each side. "Give me a hand."

Chandra doesn't know exactly what he wants, but she assumes he needs fire. She sends some shooting down each of the cracks. Flames rise to fend off the incoming blows of the Phyrexian army—and turn the Askari's burning weaponry into bladed infernos. Only a few seconds later Koth whips his arms up. Incandescent metal shards fall like the condemnation of the Multiverse on the backs of the Phyrexian army.

Yet not all meet their fate so easily. Even Teferi's concentration can flicker. Vorinclex's struggle against it at last finds purchase; he tears the jaws from Teferi's mount and sends him tumbling to the ground. In no time at all the Praetor is atop his prey.

Vorinclex's roar has heralded the death of many warriors—but fear is an old friend of Teferi's, and he does not feel its pull now.

"Look behind you."

The Praetor turns, snarling.

A blazing sword severs Vorinclex's head from his body. One of the Askari—a woman named Shella, who often drank her comrades under the table—offers Teferi a hand up. He takes it, thanks her, and then she is gone. On a battlefield there is always more work to be done.

It's then he sees the angel, hovering only a little overhead. The serenity of her expression belies the concern in her eyes.

"You'll need to be more careful."

"Elspeth...?" he asks. But the confusion on his face changes to acceptance, and he offers her a smile in the middle of the battlefield. "I'm happy you're here."



There's something foreign in the way she looks back at him, as if she doesn't entirely understand how it is she's meant to respond. In the end, she doesn't.

Teferi understands. Sometimes people change. She's still his friend—and a skilled soldier. "Any tactical advice?"

A copper root flies through the air toward Elspeth; she severs it with a single cut. She doesn't spare Teferi a glance. "Leave Nissa to me. Your forces will need to hold off Jin-Gitaxias and Norn. My sisters have given us a gift. The infection cannot take hold so long as they are with us. Don't waste it."

Elspeth speaks in a strikingly normal voice, as if she's discussing what to wear at an outing rather than plans vital to the survival of life on all planes.

"Understood," he says—but by then she's already left.

Up above them the roof of the sanctum cracks. Wrenn's work, Teferi wagers: as Zhalfir moves to take New Phyrexia's place in the Multiverse, New Phyrexia is cracking under the pressure. Structures tear and break. Slabs of metal plummet down. Zhalfirin wizards conjure the winds to redirect the boulders out toward the enemy. No amount of Phyrexian armor can protect against the forces of mass and gravity—smears of black oil are all that remain of those squashed beneath. Distant towers topple,

monuments shatter, vats crack and oil slicks the walkway. The ground rumbles beneath Teferi's feet.

These are the death throes of Phyrexia.

And there is its keening death wail: flinging aside soldiers with ease, consigning them to the abyss, is Elesh Norn. Her porcelain armor is pitted in places and outright sundered in others, revealing her weak, torn sinew beneath. Towering over the army—even the war machines—she strikes Teferi as a lion with a sour wound.

"What we've done... what I've built will last forever!" she screams. "Phyrexia will never die. You're only delaying the inevitable. Why can't you understand that? Why won't you accept your fates?!"

Teferi sends word through the ranks to focus fire on the giant praetor. A volley of magic—lightning, ice, fire, bolts of verdant energy, withering dark—beat her back. Norn staggers, swaying on her feet. Norn's oil-slicked mouth hangs open in shock; she clutches a talon to the cluster of wounds on her chest. When she surveys the army once more she lets out another scream.

"Why aren't any of you protecting me!? I *am* Phyrexia!"

The army hears her, and the army stops—but only long enough for their own general to speak up. Jin-Gitaxias rides atop a massive war machine.



Long and narrow, it is bedecked with all manner of weaponry: blades, spikes, a great ram at its head. All of this to protect its precious cargo: a vat filled with his own progeny. Writhing newt-like creatures nearly ready to be born press their featureless faces against the glass. When he speaks, the vat flickers with light. "Your ego is a tumor on whatever talent you may have had. New Phyrexia has evolved beyond you. But your scraps may serve some use."

To see them turn against one another both surprises and relieves Teferi.

As does the familiar boom of a Planeswalker's arrival—until he sees Ajani, badly wounded, joining the fray. "You?" Jin-Gitaxias sneers. "Out of the way. That thing behind you is Phyrexia's true enemy."

"No," Ajani booms. "Phyrexia stands united, or not at all."

Teferi's had no time to decide what to do before Jin-Gitaxias's legions descend on Norn and Ajani.

Centurions hack at her armor, pulling off sheets in chunks, as she crushes however many of them she can. It is as if she is being assailed by a massive swarm of beetles—all of whom have sharp teeth and sharper weapons. Ajani rips and slashes at them, first with his axe and then, when it's torn from his grasp, with his claws and teeth.

He cannot stop them all. Let them weaken Norn.

Ajani leaps in front of her only to catch a disorienting blast of magic that leaves him on his back. Ropes and nets are cast over him, and Zhalfirin warriors surge forward with spears. On an instinct he can't name, Teferi shouts "Wait! Take that one alive!"

Ajani thrashes against his bonds, leaking blood and oil into the ropes, until another spell freezes him solid. Obediently, the warriors drag the subdued leonin out of the fight.

In the meantime, Jin-Gitaxias has given Norn so much of his attention he's left himself open. Zhalfirins understood the dangers of infighting as few did. That left them in a unique position to capitalize on the failings of their foes—and save what they could of their friends.

While Jin-Gitaxias oversees his army's attack on Elesh Norn, Teferi and the vanguard head straight for him. Claws rend through steel and iron; swords and axes cleave skull and sternum. Always the Zhalfirin war chants and drums lend them vigor. As Phyrexia dies around them, the Zhalfirins are more alive than they've ever been.

When the Praetor turns to behold the splendor of their valor, he laughs, for he does not know fear. "Is this the best you can muster? *Organics*?" He gestures with his claw. Spikes shoot from the flanks of his war machine, impaling the beasts who strive to break it. Blood spurts onto the glass as the animals howl.





*"Teferi Akosa of Zhalfir", by Chris Rallis.*

"Look around," Teferi calls. "It seems to me New Phyrexia's the one getting left behind."

Jin-Gitaxias gestures once more. Blades emerge from the joints of the war machine. Another gesture and they begin to spin. Teferi's heart sinks. Many of their mounts aren't going to make it out of this. But it'll be worth if it the rest can survive—there will be time to mourn their old friends later.

Teferi ducks the oncoming swing of a centurion. Blades, tendrils, and barbs all slow as he weaves his way through the melee toward the war machine. While Zhalfir's prowess is legendary, this is something only he can do. Sucking in a breath, he lays a hand on the flat of the spinning blades.

For a precious second they come to a stop.

It is enough.

"You won't hurt Teferi!" a woman shouts. Teferi looks up to see her: one of the warclan's very own, a massive warhammer lifted high over her head as she soars toward Jin-Gitaxias. When she brings it down upon him the war machine's glass cracks. Foul-smelling liquid gushes out, bathing Teferi in its filth. New clothing will be a small price to pay to see Jin-Gitaxias plummet into his own creation. Even smaller when his own creations start eating him.

Teferi wipes his face clean.



He looks back toward the Invasion Tree. Koth is overseeing the portal. Most of them have already crossed over into Zhalfir—but some linger. Koth, Chandra, and Karn all remain. And judging from the jagged edges of the portal, there won't be much time left to return.

It's time to call for a retreat; the warclans have done enough here. Teferi signals to the drummers. The vital rhythm beneath their feet shifts to something far more dour.

Zhalfir knows what this means. For the whole to prosper, the individuals must be kept safe. New Phyrexia is fading—but that doesn't mean the Mirrans have to fade away along with it. So long as they live, they can forge a new home.

"Clear a path for the Mirrans!" comes the war-leader's shout.

Phyrexia does not let them go easily. The Zhalfirins at the front fend off what blows they can while the rear of the army retreats through the portal. With every step back they take, they leave scores of dead Phyrexians behind. There are Zhalfirins, too, among the dead—but they are treated with reverence. There are those among the army whose sole job it is to see these bodies returned home—fleetfooted Altali who weave between the tangles of the melee clad in bright white. The Zhalfirins part at the sight of their uniforms to allow them through.

By the time Teferi makes it back to the platform, nearly everyone has gone ahead. He can see his home waiting to welcome him on the other side—and he can see Wrenn, too, jutting from the tree's surface. His old friend has become a delicate ashen statue. Precious little of her bark remains intact.

Teferi swallows at the sight. When he looks over the armies once more the thought is loud in his mind: none of this would have happened without her intervention. There must be something he can do to help.

And there, as he studies her, he can see it: an acorn hidden within the ash.

It will grow strong as she did on Zhalfir.

As he carefully plucks it from the ash, Koth shouts from behind him. "I'd get to leaving if I were you."

Teferi pockets the acorn and turns. He shakes his head. "I ran once before my world was safe. Never again." His eyes fall on his old friend, Karn—still alive, though torn asunder by Phyrexian experimentation. Teferi lays a hand on Karn's shoulder as he looks to Koth. "You go on ahead."

But the young man is as stubborn as the metal that dots his skin. He's not going anywhere. And perhaps that's for the best: as a copper spear shoots toward Chandra, it is Koth who raises a shield to protect them. Strange. It isn't like Chandra to let something like that happen. She took



whatever excuse she could to melt things. When the shield sinks back to the ground, the picture's clearer.

Nissa's on the other side. "You ruined *everything*."

"You're not yourself—" Chandra starts.

"There isn't time," Koth says. "Go back through the portal."

"No. I'm not leaving without her. She's still in there, I know she is." Nissa hurls another boulder at them, forcing Chandra to blast it away. She steps in front of Koth and opens her arms toward Nissa. "If you want to kill me, here I am. But I know you won't."

Teferi bites his lip. Chandra's optimism knows no bounds—but it might get her killed here.

"She'll be all right." It's Karn who speaks from Teferi's side. "Elspeth is looking after them. May I ask a favor, Teferi?"

As if to punctuate the point, a flash of light heralds Elspeth's arrival. A second later, she drives the pommel of her golden sword into the back of Nissa's head. The elf drops like a stone out of her armor, and out of the sky.

And Chandra, of course, is there to catch her.

"Of course, old friend," Teferi says. "What can I do?"

"Buy me a moment more," Karn says. There's a wobbly tone to his voice, one Teferi hasn't heard before. "I want to walk out of this place under my own power."

Teferi can hardly deny him that. As he watches, Karn forms himself a new body, building it layer by layer.

On the horizon, Norn's torn through most of her own army. No longer does she stand tall and proud above the other New Phyrexians, for they have taken her legs. Crawling toward them is a skinless abomination. Even her headpiece has been shattered, yet still she pulls herself forward. Clawing through the fields of dead she reaches for the portal.

"We don't have long," says Teferi.

"No, we don't," agrees Karn. He flexes his new hand—a roughly hewn thing without any of his usual artistry. "You should leave."

"What about you?"

Karn looks out toward Norn. "There is something that needs to be done. Go. Tell the others that we won't be long."

...

Karn feels heavy.



It isn't a new feeling. In the most objective sense, as a golem, he's always been heavier than anything around him. In the subjective ones things often haven't been much better. Since Urza's death, Karn's felt heavy every day in one way or another. Some days, the weight of the Multiverse paled in comparison to what he felt. And some days what he feels is the weight of the Multiverse.

This is one of the latter days. Watching Elesh Norn crawl toward the platform, he's more aware than ever of the burdens he's chosen to bear. Mirrodin was his creation. Everything that's befallen it is his fault. What began as simple ignorance of his own composition—bringing glistening oil to Mirrodin—evolved into a willful ignorance of his failures. For a long time he'd consigned this place to oblivion. After Venser gave his life to save Karn's, the best thing to do seemed to be to live it in atonement. Back then he thought there must be some way to repair Mirrodin—some way to undo all of his mistakes.

He understands differently now.

Karn glances at Teferi. The mage is aglow with magic, straining to keep the portal open. After centuries of struggle, Teferi had finally righted the wrongs of his youth.

It's the same for Elspeth. All that time running away from Phyrexia, all that time trying to find a new home elsewhere, and here she'd been only moments ago resplendent in the righteousness of her new path.

You can't run away from your mistakes. You have to fix them. That starts with confronting your wrongs.

Karn steps forward. In the dilation of Teferi's time bubble, Norn's screeching is the booming bray of an unseen warhorn. What's left of her is pitiable and small. If he leaves now, she may well die from her injuries.

But he can't be sure that she will. And if Norn lives, then so does her ambition.

Many years ago Karn vowed never to bring harm to the living. He had seen the horrors of war and wanted no part of them. The first Phyrexian Invasion changed that, but those decisions never sat well in his core. What right did he have to end the life of another? He, whose life was so artificial? He hated it. He's always hated it. Whenever possible he's tried to find other solutions.

There are no other solutions to an evil as pernicious as this.

To save the lives of many, it must be exterminated completely.

How heavy this knowledge is.



Karn lays a hand on what remains of Norn's head.

To assemble something is a delight—a puzzle that pleases him in a way few things do. The interplay of connected gears and axles is as exquisite to him as any song. Music, he's found, is quite like building a machine: every piece of an orchestra must function in respect to and in tandem with its fellows. A conductor oversees the processes much as an engineer oversees his creation. In music and in creation there is unity.

In destruction there can only be solitude.

He hates it. As his magic works on Norn's body, tearing porcelain from wire, he is filled with an animal revulsion. He wants to look away. He wants to stop.

Violence, even in the service of the greater good, should never be easily wrought.

He forces himself to look. To watch the metal disintegrate. He burns the sight of Norn's corpse into his memory.

He could have asked Teferi. He could have asked Koth. Certainly, he could have asked Elspeth. But he is tired of others fixing his problems for him, and asking them to do it would be the same as killing her himself in the end. This is the smallest way he can take responsibility.



*"Mirrodin Avenged", by Scott Murphy.*

When it is done—when Elesh Norn is a red smear against the white platform—Karn walks to the gate.

Teferi relents, and time resumes. Concern shadows his expression when he sees the carnage.

"Let's go," Karn says.

It is another weight to bear, another heaviness upon him.

But it's the first step toward a lighter future.

Zhalfir welcomes him.

# FINALE
# The Rhythms of Life

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WITH THE FIGHT FINISHED,
THE SURVIVORS PICK UP THE PIECES.

---

On Kamigawa, a boy returns home, covered in the dust of a city's wreckage. When he arrives he holds himself differently—no longer afforded the wide-eyed innocence of a child. Things have changed.

His mother has changed.

The boy's father knows it the moment he hears her voice, the moment he sees her. Gone is her body, replaced by a string of characters that glow in time with false breath. A spirit that hovers before him, holding his son's hand.

And yet it is unmistakably her.

A father can wish for many things. A boy can, as well. But the one wish they share is that their family can remain together.

Fate has taken much from them—but it has not taken that wish.

The father embraces his family. The mother returns home. And the boy stands weary, but happy, in the middle of it all.

…

On Kaldheim, an elf stands on the gunwale of a commandeered ship. He watches the seas churn before him and counts the minutes. How long has it been since he's seen his brother?

A count of hundred. A count of two hundred.

How long has it been since the serpent dragged him under?

Two hundred fifty.

The fighting around them has come to a miraculous halt. Everywhere there is raucous cheering, everywhere there is music, everywhere his fellows celebrate a battle hard won.

Yet Harald has ears only for the sea.

Three hundred.

How long will it be until he gives up?

How long would it be until Tyvar gave up on him?

Harald never has to answer the question. On the count of three-hundred-thirteen, Tyvar Kell bursts from the water clinging to the serpent's



engorged head. Grinning as always he slaps its surface. "Do you see, brother? You will never outdo this!"

Harald does not often cheer when met with a boast he cannot match—but today, he will make an exception.

…

On Kaladesh, a mother braces herself for death. What hope does she have for anything else? Her only weapon is a length of sharp metal she scavenged from the wreckage of her plane. Surrounded by Phyrexian soldiers on a platform above the Aetherflux Reservoir, she has nowhere to go. The whirr of a metal blade heralds her end—but if she can at least push them off the platform as she falls, maybe it'll be safe for a while longer.

She takes a breath. Takes a step. Readies herself for the pain of impact—only for the whirring saw to still. Soldiers crumble like piles of twigs, their metal limbs falling off the platform.

Hope blooms in Pia's breast. All over Ghirapur it is the same: the Phyrexians are falling. Some stop in place, some crumble apart. Those already compleated fall to the ground as if in a deep slumber. In the distance their warship is plummeting from the sky.

They've won.



*"Render Inert", by Yigit Koroglu.*

Pia Nalaar's not sure of the mechanics of this. She doesn't know how any of this is happening, although she suspects Saheeli will fill her in later. What she does know—and what she has always known—is that she can trust in her daughter to get things done.

On that platform above the reservoir, Pia mutters a thanks to Chandra.

...



You can say much with a drum. One rhythm tells the tale of the market's latest wares; another the arrival of a new family member; a third announces the passing of an elder. When you speak in this way it will carry over a great distance. Another community's drummer may hear it and bring the news to their own people, with a flourish to tell them from whence it came. For centuries the Zhalfirins have known this: whatever they speak with their palms against stretched leather will soon resound through the plane.

And on this day the message is a simple one: *Rejoice*.

Everywhere, the drums call; everywhere, rhythm fills the chests of the Zhalfirins and tells them of the reason for their joy. Phyrexia lies broken and defeated beyond the reach of time. Zhalfir itself has found a new home among the planes, a place where they may once more entertain visitors.

Visitors like their own wandering son, Teferi.

Teferi, too, can hear the drums. It is hard not to smile when he does. For him, it's been hundreds of years away—hundreds of years in which he might have forgotten the rhythmic language of home. What a relief to stand on a grassy hill and perfectly understand it, instead. Every beat tells him that he belongs here.

And, on other days, he might feel that's true. Most days.

Today the story is more complicated. For while the people of Zhalfir are celebrating their victory, Teferi is mourning his losses.

It took the better part of two days to find the perfect spot for Wrenn. As he searched, he tried to imagine what sort of things she'd like. Would she prefer to grow among the ancient baobab trees, protected by these gigantic arbors? What about afiya—were they chattier, since there were often so many of them? Did she admire the upright, unfaltering nature of marula, or was she more interested in the flexible and mystic yew? Zhalfir had all of these and more. Which is the most fitting tribute for the woman who saved the Multiverse?

In the middle of the second day, he realized he'd been going about it all the wrong way. The trick wasn't to wonder about the specifics of the thing.

With the acorn in hand, he thought of his friend, and he walked until it felt right.

So he ended up here on this grassy hill overlooking town. A few oaks are within singing distance, he thinks, and from here she'll be able to see all manner of things in the village. And, when she's grown, she can choose to move wherever she likes. Zhalfir will welcome her.

Teferi digs. The earth is warm, the soil dark and rich. He lays the acorn in the little clearing he has made, then fills it in. Water from his own gourd he offers her. He sits next to the little mound and sighs.





*"Seed of Hope", by Gaboleps.*

"I think you'd like this," he says. "The music, I mean."

The mound says nothing.

"I *should* join them. You're right. But I wanted to make sure that you were all right first."

Down in the village, the flute players have emerged. They, too, begin to dance around the fires. He watches them for a little while: the youths with more vigor than skill, the married couples clinging to one another

with easy grace, the Mirrans who do not know the steps and the children who teach them. By all accounts, it is a beautiful sight.

"I've waited a few hundred years. A couple more minutes won't hurt anybody. And I wanted to thank you, again, for everything you've done. It's..." He runs a hand along the back of his head. "Please don't get the wrong idea, I'm grateful, more grateful than I've ever been. But it's hard to lose another friend."

When he searches the faces around the fire, so many of them are familiar. Once, he knew everyone in this village: their mothers, their fathers, who made the best food and whose food is better off slyly served to their livestock.

He has lived for years without them. Centuries. Yet to them, he has only been gone a short while. There are bridges that his countrymen can never cross with him, things they can never understand. But family rarely understands each other completely.

This place—it is home, and it isn't. It's a home he needs to learn again.

They are friends he needs to make again.

In the wake of the war against Phyrexia, that feels an impossible task.

Teferi hangs his head back. "I know the others are here," he says. "And... I know, I should go speak to them. See how they're doing."



Only the drums answer. He closes his eyes. For a long while he does not open them. Instead, he lays a palm against the earth and wills himself to truly feel it. To notice how it is still a little damp, how it feels when he tugs on the blades, the soft springiness of the dirt beneath. In the distance he can hear laughter. Someone, probably one of the Mirrans, is asking how to play the flute. Seconds later a shrill note jolts everyone off-beat—but more laughs follow. The crackle of a fire, the wind against his skin, the cool moonlight air like drinking fresh water...

...all of his wrongs made right.

There's a pain pricking at the corners of his eyes, a pressure.

For a little while, he will allow himself to weep. Tears for him and his lost years, tears for Karn and his lost past, tears for Nissa and Ajani and all of the others who may never wake now that Phyrexia has fallen.

And, most of all, there are tears for those who cannot join in the dancing by the fire.

When he is done it is the dead of night. The moon hangs high overhead. Dancing's given way to story-swapping, something he can no longer hear from where he is. The Zhalfirins listen as one of the Mirrans speaks. Fire paints his greenish skin gold, yet the look in his eyes is distant and pained. Thrun, they'd called him. He's asked after Melira every day since the end of the war.

They will all be paying the price for their freedom for years to come. Teferi included. He has to go see the others.

He gives the mound of dirt another reverent pat. “Thank you for the company,” he says. “Next time, I’ll bring the rest of our friends.”

Once he’s gotten to his feet it doesn’t take long to reach his destination. Here in the healer’s ward there is no dancing. There can’t be. In all his days as a boy, the ward was never so full as this. Beds spill out onto the surroundings, boughs shaped to hold the infirm. Healers move from one to another like bees within a hive. Here the wails of the dying provide a dirge to counter the joyous rhythm.

Teferi doesn’t look away from any of it. The results of this war have been a long time coming. If he ignores them now, he does a disservice to all those who made it a war they could win. As he searches for his friends, he takes the time to visit some of the injured and wish them well. Here and there, when he knows of something that might help, he assists the healers in their duties.

Eventually he makes his way into the main structure itself. Karn, Koth, and the others are easy to spot within it: they are sequestered away in their own section. Tonight their new suns shine on them, but in the morning the awning above will be drawn, and they will be in the cool shade.



He wonders how Karn feels about that sort of thing, if it makes any difference to him either way.

“...isn’t a fairytale. You have to stop holding on.”

Ah—that voice. Kaya. She must have arrived while he was away. As he rounds the corner into their enclosure, he readies himself for the worst.

“There’s a way. I just know there is. All we have to do is find it, right? And she’s not getting any worse, so I don’t see the harm.”

“And if she awakens?”

The air in the room is taut as a bowstring when Teferi enters. All at once he can feel their eyes on him: Karn, Koth, Chandra, and now Kaya. But there are others in the room, too. Nissa and Ajani are both laid out on their own beds. Chandra’s got Nissa’s hand in her own—she’s not moved since they got back from New Phyrexia. Koth and Karn worked with the healers here to remove as much Phyrexian metal from her as they could—but from the look of it she’d have to hold onto some. Ajani, next to her, is a newer sight. They haven’t culled anything away from him yet.

Aside from their breathing and the occasional twitching of their eyes, they are motionless. Between them—and with some help from Saheeli, during her brief visit—they think they understand why. Wrenn swapped



*"Seal from Existence", by Anato Finnstark.*

New Phyrexia and Zhalfir's places in the Multiverse. That means New Phyrexia is off somewhere nothing can reach.

"Suppose you're New Phyrexia. You're going to compleat thousands of people in short order. What's the best way to keep in contact with them?" Saheeli had asked them.

"Some kind of signal," answered Kaya. "A call only they can hear."



Saheeli nodded. "Just so. But what will you use to carry your signal? What unifies all Phyrexians?"

"Oil?" ventured Chandra.

"That's right. Maybe that's why they're so intent on spreading it—to amplify whatever signal they were spreading in the first place. Now that Phyrexia's left the Multiverse, they've gone out of range. The oil keeps listening for new orders, but isn't receiving any. Why's that? Well, there are a host of possible answers all worthy of study. However, in *my* expert opinion, I think all of it was tied back to Norn. A megalomaniac of that scale wouldn't want anyone else to have control over her army. I imagine she was the only one who could send orders—and, further, that the oil is rendered inert without her. Wouldn't want a rival seizing control when you've lost contact, would you? So without her... "

"They might be asleep forever," said Koth.

"Or they might wake up," said Chandra, who sounded as if she was trying to convince herself first and foremost. "The best thing to do is wait."

That had been days ago. Saheeli had long since left for Kaladesh anew. The rest of them? They'd continued to wait.

Of course, not everyone is so lucky as to escape with their lives in suspended animation. Melira's here, too. Teferi nods to her as he enters—but

she hardly has the strength to acknowledge him. The healers have done what they can to hide the scent of rot, but there's no mistaking it. Her chest wound's gone bad. And, judging from the clamminess of her skin and the glassy look in her eyes, she doesn't have long. Koth's at her side.

Teferi feels a pang of anger at all of them, arguing over something that could wait when Melira's in this state. Thankfully they stopped when he came in. "We can discuss that later, Kaya," he says. He picks up a small bowl and pours Melira fresh water. This he hands to Koth, who helps her to drink it. "For tonight—let's be grateful we're all here in one piece."

"Right," says Kaya. "Sorry."

"The war had us all on edge," says Koth. "And I can't say you're wrong—we do have to decide what to do with them. But maybe… maybe not tonight."

"Do you have any good news?" Chandra asks. How like her—quick to anger, but just as quick to forgive and forget.

"Some," Kaya says. "Things are starting to stabilize. Everywhere I've been, people are starting to catch their breath. Liliana's all right. So's Vivien. Tyvar's going to be bragging about killing a Phyrexian sea serpent long after we're all dead. Kaito's helping the Wanderer with reconstruction efforts on Kamigawa. Still no sign of Jace, or Vraska, but I'm not holding my breath on either of those counts."



Their conversation picks up from there. Chandra has about a thousand questions to ask and only space for ten; Kaya's happy enough to answer whatever comes her way as a peace offering.

But that's their conversation. Tidings of distant worlds probably mean little to Melira, who spent all of her life within the confines of New Phyrexia. "Is there anything I can get you?" he asks her.

To his surprise, she offers a weak smile. "You know, it's funny."

"I'm told I'm very funny," he answers. Koth's staring daggers at him for it, but Teferi knows how important laughter is to the sick—and she does chuckle a little.

"Sort of, in a… certain kind of way," says Melira. "I was hoping you'd come by. I have a request."

Teferi takes her hand. "Whatever I can do to help, just say the word."

Melira turns her head, moving as slowly as a stuck weathervane. Her glassy eyes land on Karn. "Could you call him over, too?"

There's no need. Karn can hear them well enough, and he lumbers on over. It occurs to Teferi that they might be the most miserable people on Zhalfir right now. A thick cloud of guilt stops up their throats and burns their eyes. All they can do is offer one another company.

At least until Melira breaks the silence. Though spoken in a quiet voice, the words are bright and clear as lightning. “I think... I think I have an idea for fixing the two of them.”

Koth frowns. “They’re gone, Melira.”

“Not all the way. As long as their hearts are untouched I might be able to manage something. The signal’s dead, right? So as long as we can cleanse their bodies, they should be okay.”

“...In theory,” Karn says. Teferi always admired how someone as large as his old friend could speak in hushed tones. “Although the means of doing that have escaped us.”

“That’s just the thing,” she says. “We have the pieces right here, they’ve all come together.” She pauses. Teferi’s not sure whether it’s because she’s mulling over her proposition, or because she’s too tired to keep talking right now. Before he can offer her some peace to think things through she continues. “If we’re going to do it, we have to do it soon. I don’t think I have much longer. It isn’t going to be easy, and there’ll be a price. But... I want people to have hope that it can happen. And maybe years from now someone will figure out an easier way to do it. One that won’t require me, or Karn. People need that hope.”



Teferi hangs his head. In the distance, he can hear the drums, announcing to all who will listen that Zhalfir will welcome them. Rejoice, they say. Celebrate that you’ve survived.

Not all of them have. Melira won’t survive the night.

But if they can save Nissa and Ajani... maybe it’s worth trying. Maybe they can erase just a little of this illness.

“Let’s hear the plan,” Teferi says.

...

“There you are. Do you have time to talk?”

Koth isn’t used to Elspeth’s celestial shape, but he has some faith that the woman underneath is the same. Yet only some. A woman standing atop a tree, balanced on a single foot, overlooking her surroundings in perfect stillness, can hardly be said to look human. Elspeth Tirel never looked at him with such clear eyes before.

“Koth. It is good to see you,” she says. Though she is atop the tree and he at its base, he hears her perfectly. “There is always time to talk, if talking is what’s needed. Give me a moment.”

She alights down from the tree, floating like a feather down in front of him. As the drums continue, they head out toward a clear patch of grass.

Koth can't remember the last time he saw so many plants in one place. Maybe never. Everything here feels soft and delicate, as if it's under threat from his feet, but he tries not to dwell on it. This place is not Mirrodin. It can never be Mirrodin. The Mirrodin he fought for is as dead as Elesh Norn.

But that's part of what he wants to talk with Elspeth about. Once they're out of earshot, he takes a breath. Where to start? He could ask how she became… this. Thank her for coming back to a place like Mirrodin knowing it could kill her. They could talk about what happened there, in those final moments, or they could talk about what's going on in the healer's ward now. Normally he'd know exactly where to start—but here, there's just too much.

"You want advice," Elspeth says.

He feels a smile tugging at his lips. "Didn't expect you to start things off. Yeah. I need advice."

She doesn't smile back, although there's a certain softness to her features. "This form has its blessings. What's troubling you?"

"Do you know about Melira's plan?" He asks. He isn't sure how far those new blessings extend.

"No. But I know that she will not be with us for much longer," she says. Elspeth looks up at the suns above them. "I will be very sorry for her loss."



Strange—the sorrow does touch her voice, but only slightly, and it never reaches her face. When he'd first met Elspeth, she cried often. To see her so composed now… Koth is proud, but part of him worries about her. When all of this is over, what will remain of those who fought for Mirrodin? Elspeth's an angel now, the Resistance survives bloodied and broken, Melira's about to die, and Karn…

What will they even do with Melira, afterward? She will be the first of them to die here. Among the Vulshok, bodies were burned and ashes spread. But what were the traditions here? Would the Zhalfirins want her buried beneath this soft earth, that the roots may claim her bones, and the worms feast on her flesh? They might say it's an honor to rejoin nature, but Koth knows otherwise.

Melira is from Mirrodin. They'll give her a proper send-off.

When it comes to that.

He presses his eyes closed. "She wants to try and heal the others. Ajani and the elf."

"I owe Ajani my life and much more besides," Elspeth says with a nod.

"It's going to kill her, doing that," Koth says. "And Karn's going to burn what he's got left of Venser's spark, too. They have it all planned out."

He doesn't care to argue whether or not Ajani deserves redemption; Phyrexia warps those it touches. But there's a bitterness in his heart when he considers that Ajani might make it out of this with time to consider his actions. So many Mirrans won't have the same opportunity. And no one fought to bring the bodies of their compleated brethren back—only the bodies of the dead. Why is it that Ajani and Nissa are being given a second chance at life when so many of his companions aren't?

It's a difficult thing to swallow. All the more so when the Zhalfirins have been nothing but kind to them. Fresh cooked meals every night; new, colorful homes for each of them, and plenty of visits to stave off the silence; new clothes and new friends. Hard to ask for anything more than this. Mirrodin is dead, but Mirrans can live on, thanks to Zhalfir and her people. He's grateful to them—more grateful than he can hold in his mind at any one moment.

But do Ajani and Nissa deserve that same mercy?

Elspeth's brows inch closer to each other. "Hmm. How is it meant to work?"

That she doesn't ask about Melira or Karn upsets him. He can't quite keep his tone level when he answers. "First, she's going to inoculate their bodies against further infection. That's standard. But then Karn's going to pull their sparks out. and use Venser's spark to... filter them somehow. Some theory Venser had before everything happened. When he



brings them back, Melira will clean the sparks, and then Karn will place them back inside."

The whole thing sounds risky—more so when Elspeth doesn't immediately respond. Silence only leaves him to contemplate all the ways things can go wrong. He runs a hand over the back of his head, the rough metal a welcome anchor to reality. Everything else here was too soft, too plush—even the fabric of the clothing they'd lent him. People here were kind, valiant, and attentive—but they'd never know suffering the way he did. May this roughness always remind him of that.

"You're afraid," Elspeth says.

Part of him wants to argue the point—a large part, bellowing within his chest. But he knows she's right. "Aren't you?"

She looks up at the suns again. "No."

"She's going to die."

"In a manner of her own choosing," Elspeth answers. "Once, you said to me you'd fight for Mirrodin even if there was no Mirrodin left. You stayed, knowing you might die, and leaving me no choice in the matter. You were my friend, and I left Mirrodin thinking you'd been torn apart by Phyrexians. For years that thought pained me."

Koth looks down.

"I no longer feel that pain. But the lesson lingered: we all choose how to face our end, and some causes are worth the price of a life. Melira is willing to pay that price on behalf of others. There's valor in that that," she says. Elspeth lays her hands on his shoulders. "She is making this choice herself—and for the benefit of others. She'll be among friends."

"But what do we do afterward?" Koth says. At last, it feels like he's come to the truth of it. "What are we going to do here?"

Elspeth remains serene—but she does offer him a smile. "You will try to make this place home. It will welcome you, if you let it."

"I'm not sure I know how anymore," he says. "And I don't think it's that simple."

"Many things aren't. But that doesn't mean they're not worth trying."

She draws him into an embrace—and he finds himself slumping against her, trying to make sense of the cacophony in his head. Elspeth could be difficult sometimes, but this is something new entirely. He's not sure how much she's listening to him. This place isn't his home. His home is gone, forever, and she's just...

He hates how much the embrace helps. Words don't mean much, but at least she knows when someone needs holding. "You... You've changed, haven't you?" he mumbles.



"Yes," comes the simple answer. "But I will always be your friend, Koth. If you ever have need of me, all you have to do is pray." He feels her squeezing tighter—and hears the flap of her wings. She's taking him somewhere. The irony hits him like a hammer to the chest. Years ago, he'd sunk her into the ground to send her someplace else. He didn't want her to have a choice. Tonight, she lifts him through the air to make his choice for him.

The wind whips against his skin. "This isn't goodbye."

"No, not with me," she says. "But you do owe someone a goodbye."

His feet touch the ground again. She's left him in front of the Healer's Ward. The earth brings with it the weight of what will soon happen.

It isn't his earth. The earth here is soft and springy, yielding too readily to him. Nothing here is metal save the things the Zhalfirins have made themselves—and even then they favor bone and glass where the Vulshok would use steel.

Nothing about this place is home. He doesn't see how it could be. Maybe Elspeth can, from her vaunted place, but here on the ground...

"Thank you," he calls to Elspeth. As much as his mind was still an avalanche, she'd at least tried to help.

"Always," she says.

Always. So easy for her to say. She might be immortal now—she has all of eternity to make herself feel at home. But him?

Koth crosses his arms. He watches Elspeth take off beneath Mirrodin's suns. He watches the suns, too, as they move across a new firmament. Saheeli, the scientist, said it was probably an unintended consequence of the planes overlapping.

An unintended consequence—just like him and the other Mirrans.

He takes a breath. This won't be easy. But so long as those suns are in the sky, he can face it.

This place isn't home. But there's a little of home in it.

...

"Let's do this outside. I want... I want to be outside, when it happens."

In the face of everything they're about to do, Melira's request is simple. Teferi and the others promise to honor it.

Outside they go: Teferi, Karn, Koth, Chandra, Kaya, and Melira. The nights here are warmer than days on some other planes, but it is not an unpleasant sort of warmth. No, as they step out into the swaying grass, each feels curiously as if they're stepping into someone's home.



The first order of business is to spread out blankets for Nissa and Ajani to lay on. Next comes setting them down. The sunlight lends their Phyrexian implants a gilded luster.

"You're sure this is going to work?" Kaya asks.

"We won't know until we try," says Chandra, clearing away strands of hair from Nissa's face. "And it's worth it to try."

Silence, then, that Teferi worries will become another argument.

In the end Kaya nods. "Right. Well... I'll help where I can."

He's grateful she doesn't illuminate all the ways this could go wrong. There are many, and there are many things left to do. For this to work all of them have to work in harmony—just as the drums of different communities come together.

His job is, in some senses, the easiest, and he will lose the least through this process. Part of him almost resents that. No, that's a young man's thinking, and selfish besides. He will make good by doing good.

Right now, doing good means forming a small time bubble around them. It won't last long. Looking over the others, he asks if they are ready.

Koth lays Melira down between Ajani and Nissa. With her eyes closed, she nods.

Karn takes his place standing over everyone's heads. His shoulders rise and fall with unnecessary breath. It is hard not to smile at it a little at him taking on such human traits—but this is not a time for smiling. Karn will lose almost as much as Melira in this. If he is nervous, it is only natural. "I'm willing to try."

"All right," says Teferi. "I won't be able to keep this up for long."

He breathes in. The soft vibration of the drums fills his lungs as surely as the air. Magic hums within him. His body aches still from the war's exertions, but he will not falter when his friends need him. Not anymore.

All at once, the air distorts around them. The whipping grass slows to a near standstill. Outside of the unseen sphere of power, the world continues on—but here they have only the space between two beats of a drum to save their friends.

Karn acts first. Driving his hand into the metal portions of their bodies, he pulls *something* out, something shimmering and bright. Teferi's ears ring as Karn's magic builds within him, an engine gathering steam. Or is this hesitation? What he is about to do will change him forever. In some ways, he's saying goodbye to an old friend to save two new ones. No wonder there's so much angst to him.

Teferi strains against the waves of time. Karn will make the right choice here, he knows it.



Light leaks from within the silver golem's plates, light as pale and glistening as the moon's. Karn closes his eyes. "Together, Venser," he says, quiet in a way only he can be.

A thundering boom threatens to throw off Teferi's concentration, but he holds fast. It passes, and the two orbs Karn had been holding are gone. Melira takes the hands of her companions. She, too, begins to glow—a glow which spreads through the Nissa and Ajani. Her face wrenches in concentration.

First, the leonin.

Every second that cannot pass is a hook in Teferi's soul. He grunts as he strains to keep time stopped long enough for Melira to finish her work. As he watches, the glow ripples through Ajani. Wherever it goes it leaves their skin brighter, and removes the sinister luster Phyrexia has impressed upon them. The metal that remains is nearly as pure as Moonsilver.

But this is only half the work.

Another boom sees the two orbs returning to Karn's hands—one whole and pure, one crumbling.

As Melira turns her attention to Nissa's orb, Teferi's heart sinks. It's flickering. Worse than that are the ash-like motes of energy falling away from it. Teferi is used to seeing things happen in slow motion; this is like

watching a leaf decay right before his eyes. Lattice-holes open as the light courses through it.

"I can't slow that down!" Teferi shouts.

"Quickly!" says Melira.

Kaya helps her up, so that she can reach the orbs. A single touch and a halo of light ripples out of them.

It's almost time, almost.

Violet wreathes Kaya. She, too, drives her hands into the spheres of light. Together with Karn they send them back to their respective hosts.

Teferi drops his spell—and drops to his knees. Sweat slicks his brow. The drums return, carrying with them news he is too tired to follow. All he can do is turn his attention to the others and hope that what they've done is worth the sacrifices they've made.

His answer comes when Ajani's good eye flutters open, when breath returns to his scarred chest. In spite of his injuries he forces himself to sit up. "What... Where am I?"

"Zhalfir," says Kaya.

"Zhalfir? That's impossible," he says—but the more he looks around, the more he seems to realize it's the truth. But so too does the tiredness





*"Negate", by Viko Menezes.*

overtake him. He slumps back over to the ground. "Teferi... I'll congratulate you some other time. I think my body needs to rest."

He's asleep before Teferi can say much else—and for the better. Let him have a few moments of peace before the horror of what he did dawns on him.

Karn slumps over, one hand to his great chest. The lights within him have dimmed; only the ghost of them remains, an afterimage in red and violet.

"Are you all right?" Teferi calls.

"It's... I feel lonelier," Karn says. "I will miss him, but I'll be all right."

Koth is less sure. He kneels next to Melira and pulls her onto his lap. She fell as fast as Teferi did. The concern on his brow is easy to read—as is the misery that compels him to close his eyes. "She's gone."

Kaya lays a hand on his shoulder.

Tears run down his cheeks, yet Koth does not conceal them, or hide how much pain he's in. Teferi knows exactly the kind of pain that's driving him now. It isn't just Melira's death. It's everyone's, felt at the same time—all of his friends, comrades... almost everyone he ever knew. Gone.

Teferi pushes himself up. He and Karn both throw an arm around Koth as the tears take over. There aren't words enough at times like these. Their only consolation is that Melira's wound no longer troubles her—that she no longer has to live in fear. But to say this would be cold comfort to Koth, so Teferi bites his tongue. Companionship will have to do. Grief is an awful burden to bear alone.

Yet the air is thick with grief. Next to them, Chandra shakes Nissa, anxiety flaring hotter with every second.

"What happened? Why isn't she awake yet? The flickering..."

"Something went wrong," Teferi says. He swallows. "I'm not sure if she's..."



Maybe it'd been too much to hope for. Returning someone from phyresis... even Urza hadn't figured that one out. Who were they to try? Having no other options didn't mean they'd succeed. You could dedicate your whole life to a craft and never get any acclaim for it. You could spend every waking minute laboring to further a cause and never see it come to fruition. Wanting something so badly it threatens to break you does not mean you are entitled to it.

But sometimes...

"Chandra. . .?"

...Sometimes, it'll be worth it.

It's worth it to be alive here on Zhalfir. It's worth it to be surrounded by old friends and older community—families old and new.

It's worth it to put the past, at last, behind him. To build a new future.

And it's worth it to see that happen for the others.

To see the tension on Chandra's face melt to pure happiness, to see her clutch Nissa close and to see Nissa hold her in turn, to hear the happy sobs along with the despairing ones...

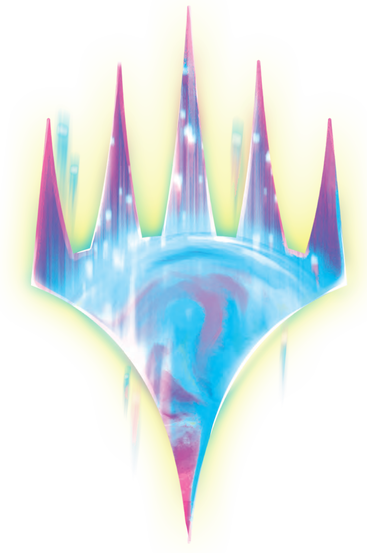
This is life. This is what they all fought for. What Melira died for, why Karn's given up his spark, why Teferi spent hundreds of years trying to restore his home.

For this.

"I'm right here," Chandra says. She presses her lips to Nissa's. "I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere."

Good, Teferi thinks.

He won't be going anywhere for a while, either.



MAGIC
THE GATHERING



# MARCH OF THE MACHINE THE AFTERMATH

By Grace P. Fong & Emily Teng

# EPISODE I
# She Who Breaks the World

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SAVED FROM COMPLEATION, NISSA STILL CARRIES THE WEIGHT OF EVERYTHING SHE DID AS ONE OF NORN'S EVANGELS. CUT OFF FROM HER HOME PLANE, NISSA DISCOVERS A SECRET THAT WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING SHE KNOWS ABOUT THE MULTIVERSE.

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Nissa Revane is digging her grave. Under the cover of night, she drives her shovel into Zhalfir's ground and wipes sweat from her brow. The task should come easily to her. It's just dirt, after all. Once, she could bend nature with a whim, but now her heart pounds, her limbs shiver. She concludes she must have overexerted her recovering body and decides she will take a well-deserved rest upon completing this task. But she cannot ignore the question that claws at her heart: is this what happens when a Planeswalker loses her spark?

She asked the others what happened, but they could only describe the battle and her revival. No one could answer what had happened within

her soul. Chandra suggested it was a side effect of her revival. Karn theorized it was damaged when the Phyrexians altered Nissa's mind and body.

But Teferi only listened and nodded. "It's not just her," he said.

Teferi's spark had faded sometime after the invasion. Koth's as well. Chandra is the only one among them who seemed to have kept hers—well. Chandra, and Ajani.

The Sylex had gone off in the Blind Eternities. Holes had been punched in the space between planes. Maybe this is some sort of natural response from the Multiverse; a great pruning, a taking back of that mysterious energy that once filled them. It doesn't matter the cause, though. No amount of theorizing offers Nissa comfort.

So to comfort herself, she touches the heavy clod she lifted from the red earth, but the dirt does not reassure her like the familiar soil of her home plane, Zendikar. She squeezes it between her fingers. She asks the plane how it feels, but it does not answer. Perhaps the damage extends beyond her spark, right to her animist powers.

She hears something else, though. Not the deep, reverberating, voice of a plane that shakes her very soul, but something distant, lively, and human: music. The drums of Mirrodin and Zhalfir are celebrating their victory over the Phyrexian invaders. Since leaving the austere Joraga clan in her youth, music had become her favorite indulgence, but today it mocks





*"Nissa, Resurgent Animist", by Tuan Duong Chu.*

her, does nothing but make her chest ache. She knows somewhere in the firelight, her friends are celebrating, too.

Just that morning, Karn and Koth had finished roofing the last house in a new village. Nissa saw relief—even happiness—in their eyes as they moved in alongside the Mirran refugees, for they were all united as survivors. They had invited her to join them.

"Are you sure I'm welcome?" she had asked.

"Of course." Teferi put his hand on her shoulder and said, "You will have a new home here if you just try."

So Nissa worked with the other survivors, ate with them, talked with them. But it wasn't the same. Teferi had his country again. Koth and Karn were forging a new one. Nissa's Zendikar was locked a Multiverse away.

But Zhalfir still never spoke to her. Neither did the five colored suns, more refugees from Mirrodin now at home in Zhalfir's sky. She felt cut off, lost in the Multiverse with no voice calling her home. Maybe no plane would hear her ever again. They'd all lost their sparks, but only Nissa still wanted to planeswalk.

Even if her friends seemed to be moving on without her, she still cared about their happiness. So not wanting to bring down the spirits of their



celebration, she excused herself. There's at least one task she can do. She thrusts her shovel into the ground.

Again.

And again.

Finally, the hole is deep enough. Next to it, her Phyrexian carapace awaits burial. With the Phyrexian leader dead and her virulent vice grip on the Glistening Oil severed, the survivors were able to cleanse it with Halo, but the inert metal still remained. Its copper skeleton is covered in mangled spikes, and those spikes are covered in the dried blood of her friends. She rubs one, and dark residue flakes off on her fingertips. She wonders whose blood it was. Maybe Koth? Maybe Wrenn? Maybe Chandra?

Chandra.

She had hurt Chandra, almost killed her.

Nissa and the other Planeswalkers had tried to fight the Phyrexian invaders, but they became the enemy's weapons. After the Phyrexian defeat, Nissa's friends said they forgave her. They cut her out of her metal prison and cleansed her mind of the Phyrexian influence. They cleansed the oil from her Stem Sword, but they could not cleanse the memories of what she had done.

The copper ribcage had been both trap and armor, a construct of crippling terror yet intoxicating power. It granted her the ability to unleash a call through the branches of the Invasion Tree and speak the glory of Phyrexia to every plane in the Multiverse.

And right now, Nissa is disgusted with herself because—despite her friends' sacrifices, despite Chandra's sacrifices—part of her misses hearing those planes.

She tries to kick the carapace into the grave she dug, but it is heavy, heavier than the shovel, heavier than the earth.

Someone behind her speaks, "You left the party early. Wanted to make sure you got something to eat."

Nissa would recognize that voice anywhere. She turns to face Chandra Nalaar, arm outstretched, offering her half a ripe mango. The smile on Chandra's face is warm, and Nissa knows she does not deserve it.

Nissa shakes her head, "I'm not hungry."

She watches Chandra's gaze drift to the shovel and then the emptied Phyrexian shell. "Need help?"

"I'm fine."



Chandra steps forward anyway. She hands the mango to Nissa and puts her palms against the copper hull. Heat radiates from her fingers, and the dirty metal starts to cave under her touch. Her hair ignites into a shock of flame.

Nissa can't help but think she's so beautiful like this.

The spikes bend down with the heat. The carapace softens into a formless hunk of slag. The smell of cooling metal fills the night air, and Nissa wants to tell Chandra to stop, to let her have just this one small success.

But instead, she still tells Chandra, "Thanks."

"No problem!" Chandra winks, and with one swift kick, punts the crumpled skeleton into the hole. Without hesitation, she gestures for Nissa's shovel. "The sooner we fill this hole, the sooner you can get back to having fun!"

Instead, Nissa hands Chandra the uneaten mango. "I'll celebrate when I'm done."

Chandra drops the mango to grab Nissa's wrist with both hands. Her palms are so warm. "Just do it later, then! C'mon!"

Nissa knows Chandra's just trying to make her feel better by focusing on their victory,  but it's not working. She slides gently out from Chandra's grasp. "I'll be quick. Promise."

But Chandra does not leave. She paces around, using her foot to nudge dirt into the grave when she thinks Nissa isn't looking. There's something she's not saying.

So Nissa asks, "Is there a reason I have to go right now?"

Chandra gnaws her lip before lowering her head and softly admitting, "…because if you're too late, I might not be there."

As Chandra's words sink in, Nissa's memory drifts back to the day she awoke in Zhalfir. The first thing she felt was Chandra's warm hand gripping her own, and the first thing she saw was Chandra's broad smile. Her limbs were weighed down by dead copper metal, but her thoughts were hers. Chandra's smile was hers.

*I'm right here.* Chandra had said. *I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere.*

Nissa wants to stay something, to remind Chandra of her own words. But before she can protest, Chandra's voice spills out to fill the quiet she can't stand. "Tomorrow, I'm leaving to find Ajani."

Nissa opens her mouth to reply, but she doesn't know how to respond to a broken promise. Her reticence only troubles Chandra further.



"It's only for a bit! Only until I find him. I'm one of the few people who can still planeswalk, right? If I can't bring him back, who can? And I know you'll be right here, waiting for me—"

But Nissa does not want to wait here. She doesn't get to choose, because she's not a Planeswalker.

Nissa barely hears herself when she whispers, "…but you kissed me."

You finally kissed me.

Chandra shifts from foot to foot. "I mean, yeah, but I still gotta go—"

The rest of Chandra's words mean nothing to Nissa. How could Chandra love so many people so freely? Yet leave her so easily? Does she lack more than just a spark? She has to know.

Nissa steels her voice. "Then be clear—exactly what kind of love do you have for me?"

Nissa watches anxiety build inside Chandra, made of words she doesn't know how to say, turning into frantic hand gestures that start, stop, and start again as if her fingers could shape her jumbled thoughts into sentences. What comes out is, "I–I–…" Chandra's hands drop to her sides. "Like, I knew I had to save you."

"You're a hero, Chandra, a Planeswalker. You'd save anyone." Nissa thrusts her shovel into the ground. "Am I no different than anyone else?"

"No, that's not it! It's–it's—it's hard to explain—it's just so big, like, I can't describe it. Isn't that enough? Can't you just believe me when I say you mean everything to me? Everything!"

Nissa frowns. Because what Chandra is saying doesn't match what Chandra is doing. Nissa thought Chandra would know better. That the kind of love Nissa needs is one that won't leave her. Or has she once again been drawn into Chandra's inextricable orbit only to be trapped in a one-sided love? Like her own personal, Immortal Sun.

"Please," Chandra begs. "Can't you at least tell me if something's wrong?"

Nissa looks down at the charred husk of her metal bones. To Nissa, her pain is so obvious, but she doesn't have the strength left to describe it, let alone heal it. She couldn't tell Teferi, Karn, or Koth about it, and she still can't even tell Chandra. Nissa shakes her head. "Go, then, find Ajani, and I'll just wait here."

Chandra cups her hand around Nissa's cheek and gently turns her head until their eyes meet. She bites her lips, and her voice is low with consolation. "I'll be back," she says, "Zhalfir's not a bad place, Nissa. I think you'd like it if you tried."



Nissa Revane is sick of trying. Turning to hide the tears welling in her eyes, she picks up her shovel. She does not watch Chandra planeswalk away, but Nissa can still smell the scent she leaves behind, like the last wisps of smoke from a fireplace.

...

Nissa wakes the next morning, and the first thing she feels is Chandra's absence. Instinctively, she reaches out to the soul of this unfamiliar plane for comfort, but Zhalfir is silent. Perhaps the land also hurts because it misses its home. The sting of a second abandonment pierces her heart, and she wonders whether even Ashaya, the elemental worldsoul of her home plane, would still recognize her call.

Nissa's nickname, 'Shaya,' meant Worldwaker, not world breaker.

She lays on her bedroll, counting every inhale, every exhale. It's been a long time since she truly meditated. She used to practice every day before she joined the Gatewatch, before she met Chandra. She should try again.

But not here. Every voice, every sound, every vibration of life outside her tent reminds her how the distance has grown between her and her friends. Still, there's one who might understand.

Nissa takes her staff and climbs the forested hill that overlooks the village. Awkwardly, she lowers herself to the ground, sitting with her legs

crossed beside the sprout that used to be Wrenn. She's growing fast, nurtured by the light of Zhalfir's five newly inherited suns.

Nissa had only spoken once to the dryad, and there's no point in speaking to the seedling. Nevertheless, she feels a unique kinship with the only other Planeswalker who bound herself to the Invasion Tree. Nissa saw so many ugly things from her time as a Phyrexian, but one beautiful moment stands clear in her mind. When Wrenn knit her fragile body into the sinew of the Invasion Tree, Nissa's bones were filled with haunting, beautiful music. It was more than a single treesong. It was a hymn sung by a chorus of planar voices, played on the strings of leylines.

Nissa tries to remember that song now. She closes her eyes and slows her breath. She listens to her heartbeat, willing it to calm with each inhale and exhale. She reaches into herself, to the roots of her soul.  And she listens.

A song lies beyond the silence.

Its low tone rumbles deep in Nissa's chest, like her early days as an animist, before Ashaya. She turns her heart toward it, but she hears something else. A quiet, tinny, ringing coalesces behind her eyes.

Never mind that. She focuses on that song, the planar magic. But when she does, the ringing grows. She calls louder, and so does the noise. Her ears are itching, twitching, burning now.



Still, she tries again. Her heart pounds. Her soul screams out to the whispered song. But her cry is muffled by dozens of new, alien voices she recognizes and despises: the Eldrazi, Bolas, and finally, loudest, Phyrexia.

The ringing explodes into skull-shattering static. Vivid, lightning pain crackles in her muscles and up her spine. Colored sparks explode in the dark of her vision.

She screams for real.

...

When Nissa opens her eyes, she lies flat on her back in the shade of a nearby acacia, and the silent truth stares back at her: every being who touched her mind was now buried in her soul. She has spent so long connected to others that she has smothered her own connection to the Multiverse. Whether or not those bonds were made of her own volition, the planes have rejected her.

She rises unsteadily to her feet. As her vision sharpens, she sees a blue light hovering in the air, a glow pulsing to the beat of the leyline song. Its edges resemble ragged cloth, as if someone took a knife to the fabric of reality. Nissa reaches toward it and quickly pulls her hand back as a bolt of electricity jumps to her fingers.

With a thunderous boom, the light tears open.

The force throws Nissa to the ground. She scrambles to her knees just in time to dodge the massive creature that burst from the light. The beast is like nothing she has seen before, a predator larger than a bear with deadly claws that emit curling storm clouds. Golden fissures of lightning trace its muscular body, emitting sparks that threaten to ignite the dry grass. The ground cracks under its feet, and with a swing of its limbs, a nearby shrub goes flying. When it sees Nissa, it bellows with rage.

She can't let it near the village. Too many are still recovering from the wounds of war. They cannot handle a frenzied animal.

Nissa Revane may not be a Planeswalker, but she's the only person here right now.

She rolls across the ground. With one smooth motion, she grabs her staff and charges it with magic. Its tip lights green, and the desert grass bends to her will. It entwines with itself, becoming thick ropes to entangle the creature's legs. But on contact with its electric skin, the plant matter dries and crumbles to ash. Nissa summons roots, branches. The enraged beast tears through them all the same, leaving dust in its wake.

Still, she bought herself an opening to get back on her feet. With one deep breath, she tries to recall what it felt like to be a hero, to stop being letting this creature play her like a game piece and become the hand that moves it.



She wraps her fingers around her staff, and its twisted wood comes to life. Green vines curl around her wrists as she draws the sword from its heart. She sends her magic down the blade, and its metal shines green. She steps nimbly forward, but the use of even a little magic has somehow winded her.

The beast lunges, but this time Nissa is ready. She vaults upward onto its back. When it rears, she has to dig her grip into its fur just to hold on. Burning heat pierces her glove, and she knows she won't have long.



*"Animist's Might", by John Tedrick.*

She doesn't want to hurt the creature, but she needs to immobilize it. She drives her sword into one of the lightning cracks on its flank–not too far, just a prick for something so large. Green magic unwinds from the blade, solidifying into thick, spiked vines that pierce the creature's leg and wrap around its body. The beast bucks wildly before dropping to its damaged knee. The movement throws Nissa into the air, and she has barely enough time to tuck into a roll before hitting the ground.

She rights herself and looks at the animal. Her weapon is still wedged in its side. She watches the vines connected to it burn away again. The creature shakes and rises, unscathed and even angrier. Its eyes meet hers as her sword falls out, useless, onto the ground.

Nissa presses her hands to the earth, calling to the leylines for help as she used to. The ground glows under her touch as she asks, pleads, begs, for an elemental to appear. The pebbles around her tremble, and hope rises in her chest.

Then they fall right back down.

Zhalfir cannot hear her.

The creature charges directly into her, catching her on its broad claws. With a shake of its massive arms, it tosses her forward and she lands yards away with a sickening crunch. Pain explodes through her entire body.



Through bleary vision, she lifts her chin and sees the beast readying to charge, claws extended to gore her and lightning crackling down its spine. Perhaps this creature is no ordinary animal. She thinks back to how it appeared when she tried to reach the leylines. Maybe this *is* an elemental she summoned, one sent by Zhalfir to avenge the wrongs she had committed in the name of Phyrexia.

She does not want to die. But she cannot deny her crimes deserve it.

She lets her head drop fully to the ground. After all, why fight the world when you know who will win?

The creature lunges forward, fangs bared. Nissa braces for the blow.

When suddenly, the beast stops.

It hangs suspended in time, gnarled claw ready to strike. Nissa feels strong, warm, hands lifting her out of danger, and Koth's voice tells her, "We've got you."

"Don't hurt it…" Nissa tries to say, but she isn't sure anyone can hear her.

She sees Teferi, staff outstretched, his radiant, blue spell holding the beast in place. Karn moves toward the creature and wraps his massive metal arms around the creature's neck.

"I'm going to let go now," Teferi states.

Karn nods. “Ready.”

Time resumes. The beast finishes its swing, but its claws strike only air where Nissa used to be. It wrestles against Karn, but its claws rake uselessly against steel. It gnashes its fangs, but Karn tightens his chokehold so it can’t turn its neck.

Then the air grows hot with the smell of ozone, and white lightning bursts from the creature’s skin. The explosion throws all four to the ground, and Nissa lifts her head just in time to see the creature barrel into the distance, storm clouds trailing behind it.

Koth is back on his feet, sliding his arm under Nissa to help her up. He returns her weapon, now back in its staff form. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” Nissa struggles out of his grip. She takes the staff, using it to stand despite the pain throbbing down her entire body. “How did you find me?”

“Teferi was going to visit Wrenn when he saw a strange light at the top of the hill and gathered us to investigate. Luckily, she’s all right, too,” Koth says, gesturing toward the plant.

“It’s one strange light, all right,” she hears Teferi say. He stands in front of the place the beast emerged, where she had seen the hole in reality. Now, the gap is a massive portal, tall enough for any of them to walk through, even Karn.



“The creature,” she explains. “I think it came out of there.”

The portal calls to Nissa. Something on the other side hums with the energy of a leyline song. It’s like a chorus of overlapping, chaotic, melodies from different planes, but through it all, she feels a familiar vibration. It’s faint, but it sounds like Zendikar. Even if the plane cannot hear her, her heart instinctively fills with longing. But she needs more than instinct. She needs to understand. So she dares to ask, “Where do you think it leads?”

She wants it to lead her home.

“Hard to say,” Teferi muses. “But that beast certainly wasn’t from Zhalfir.”

Desire grips Nissa’s chest even harder. “Could it have traveled from another plane?”

Karn appeared to shrug, an awkward gesture with his massive shoulders. “It’s possible. Realmbreaker burrowed holes through the fabric of reality. The Sylex exploded in the Blind Eternities. Who knows what that might have changed.”

Nissa’s throat tightens as she speaks. “Do you think that one of us should go through?”

Silence passes over the group, and Nissa begins to worry. They could merely be thinking, or there could be something they aren't telling her.

Finally, Karn shakes his head. "The risks there are incalculable. If it indeed led to the Blind Eternities—without a spark, you could be instantly destroyed."

"But that creature wasn't destroyed!" Nissa shakes her head. Every frail strand of hope that she has built frays and snaps. Again, this is what it means to not be a Planeswalker.

Teferi places a reassuring hand on Nissa's shoulder. "Or it's possible that creature is a Planeswalker. But that's only one of an infinite number of possibilities. We don't know where this portal leads, so we can't say for sure what will happen. But to step through… well, that would simply be a leap of faith."

A leap of faith.

Nissa is not the type of person who takes leaps of faith. Chandra, though. Chandra is a person who could do it. Without even thinking.

Koth speaks, interrupting their analysis. "I feel the need to remind everyone that the creature is still out there, and it's lost and angry. Our people have suffered greatly, and we have a duty to protect our new home



from further risk." He nods at Nissa. "Let's corral this creature, and then we can talk about exploring."

The group agrees, and as much as Nissa loathes to abandon the portal, she knows Koth is right. As much as the war took from her, others have lost even more. They need to help first.

Teferi, Koth, and Karn have already begun to walk down the hill. Nissa follows as quickly as her tired legs and aching ribs can, but before joining them, she takes one last look at the glowing portal behind her.

…

Nissa still hurts. She lies on the bedroll in her tent, reaching for sleep that will not come. The Civic healer had looked exhausted, but she still took the time to look Nissa over. Nothing seemed broken. Nothing physical, anyway. Even so, she still made Nissa stay behind when Teferi, Karn, and Koth went to find the lightning beast. In some ways, Nissa is glad for the rest because it means she can be alone.

She hears muffled voices outside, going about their daily tasks, gossiping about people she has never met. She rolls over and attempts to sleep again. Times like these make her wish elven hearing wasn't so sensitive.

But then, the voices quicken, grow louder, and her calm is shattered by a scream. Followed by the sound of thunder.

Electricity heats the air, making her hair stand on end. Nissa has no doubt: the creature from the portal is here. Dread sinks into her stomach. What if it's looking for her? What if it followed her here to complete its mission?

Her actions have left the village unguarded and in danger. She staggers upright, grabbing her staff as she exits the tent.

Still not a Planeswalker, she thinks. Once again, just the only person around.

The creature is busy ransacking the mess tent. The ground is littered with torn canvas and spilled pots of stew. Even the largest wooden tables have been cracked in half, reduced to splinters. A brave team of Zhalfiran and Mirran warriors have surrounded it, but she can see their weapons are still in desperate need of repair from the fight with the Phyrexians. She needs to help them lead it away from the village.

With the help of her staff, she casts her magic forward. Thick roots emerge from the ground. They loop around the beast's neck and limbs, trying to tie it down or at least pull it in another direction. The effort causes Nissa's legs to shake, but she wills herself to stay standing.

She won't have much time until it burns the restraints away, but she takes advantage of its confusion. There! She runs toward a thick baobob tree just outside the village.



"Over here," she growls, unleashing another barrage of angry vines.

The creature takes the bait. It turns away from the villagers' swords and spears, mere nuisances compared to this prickly, new attacker. It swings at the plants, claws cutting them down like a scythe. A few feet away, Nissa raises another onslaught. The beast lunges forward again to chase its quarry. Slowly, vine by vine, swing by swing, Nissa leads the creature out of the village.

She breathes a sigh of relief to see the wounded inhabitants hurrying to safety. She's done one good thing at least. But the effort has exhausted her. The green light in her staff fizzles. She collapses to her knees.

And the creature has only one target now: Nissa.

It looms above her, claws ready to strike her down.

It's so damn big up close. Nissa raises her staff in defense and braces for impact.

Again, it doesn't come.

A lone, burning, figure stands in the way. Chandra.

Internally, Nissa curses the knack for Planeswalkers to show up exactly where there's trouble. Chandra has thrown up a barrier of fire between

them and the creature. The beast staggers back and forth, trying to reach the prey it cornered just a second ago.

Now, she's hurling fireball after fireball at the animal, which is growing more and more agitated. It shakes, and static sparks off its fur. She instructs Nissa, "I'll take it from here! Head back to the village!"

But Nissa was the one who summoned the creature. It followed her here, not Chandra. This is Nissa's fight, and Chandra can't even let her have that. Her staff blazes with green light. Hundreds of thorny vines thrust from the ground. One almost hits Chandra in the face.

"Hey! Watch it!" the pyromancer shouts.

The vines whip at the beast. It roars against each stinging strike. One of them catches a fireball and ignites. The beast whines slightly, moving away from the flaming lash. Nissa watches Chandra crank up the heat. She grits her teeth as she watches every vine she conjured disintegrate in a blast of flame. It was as if she hadn't done anything at all. Sweat forms on her brow as she searches the landscape for her next move.

Her eyes pass over the baobab. The baobab! Their thick trunks resist fire, and the massive tree would be a staunch ally if she could animate it. She reaches her magic toward it, coaxes each branch to life. But she's not summoning an elemental that walks of its own accord, she must concentrate with all her effort, will it to move, puppet every action. Her breathing is labored. Her trembling palms sweat under her gloves.



Stem by stem, root by root, she forces it out of the ground. She gives it one final push, launching it at the beast. It hits the creature in the side, bowling it over into the grass. Tired as she is, Nissa still relishes the fleeting feeling of victory.

Because Chandra takes this as her cue. "Thanks!" she grins. She burns even hotter. Too hot. She encloses the beast and the tree in a ring of flames as tall as an elephant.

Nissa smells smoke, and she realizes the dry grass is starting to kindle. "Chandra, stop!"

The pyromancer doesn't seem to hear her, or doesn't seem to care. She tightens her circle, closer to the creature. It paces the edge, panicking as the flames close inward. It rears up, claws and teeth thrashing, and smashes the baobab to pieces. The water inside the tree evaporates immediately on contact with Chandra's superheated flame, turning into white steam.

Neither Nissa nor Chandra could have predicted the creature's next move. It inhales. With one deep breath, the storm beast sucks the hot steam from the sky. The added moisture makes it double in size. More than double. Now colossal, it bats away the shards of broken tree like playthings. The burning debris sets the grass ablaze wherever it lands.

It towers over the women.

They run, but every step the creature takes equals twenty of theirs. Soon, they find themselves directly under its massive form. It readies an attack.

"Watch out!" Chandra pushes Nissa out of the way of its snapping jaws, sending them both tumbling into the hole left by the uprooted baobab.

When the dizziness of the fall fades, Nissa looks up. The beast is scratching, gnashing at the opening, but the gap is too narrow for his huge form. They're safe, but for how long?

"Aaaaaaaaaarrrrgh!" Chandra's lit hair flares with frustration. She points her hands up toward the creature, another blast charging in her open palm.

The beast has them trapped. The entire savannah is going to burn. "Stop!" Frustration and loneliness fill Nissa's lungs, emerging in a howl. "Just let me save myself for once!"

The light fizzles in Chandra's hands. "What?"

Nissa's heart is trembling, but this time, not from exhaustion. She uses all the energy she has left to turn her thoughts, her regrets, her worries, into words. "You made me a promise, Chandra, and you still left. Do you think," she says, voice cracking, "that because I no longer have a spark, that I'm happy to see you running around the Multiverse like nothing has changed? That I'm happy just waiting for you to come back?"



The flames in Chandra's hair extinguish themselves, returning to warm, natural red.

Nissa chokes as she speaks. "If that's how it's going to be, you don't need to return. I'll take care of myself."

Chandra pauses, thinking about what to say, and lowers her head. Her voice is soft when she answers, "No. I know you. Well, *knew* you. I guess things have changed. And they're still changing." She raises her warm eyes to meet Nissa's. "But I still want to know you."

Chandra takes Nissa's hands in hers, and Nissa's heart leaps to her throat.

"Nissa, I'm so, so, so, so sorry. Spark or not, you're an incredible fighter and even better person, and I'm so sorry to have ignored that."

But Nissa's soul still aches. She isn't ready to forgive just yet.

At that moment, fire and dirt begin to rain down on their heads. Unable to reach them, the lightning beast has decided to smother them instead. "Perhaps we can stop it if we work together," Nissa says.

Chandra nods. "All right, what's the plan?"

Warmth swells in Nissa's chest to finally be asked, but without her strongest magic, she can only respond, "I don't know."

"Is there anything we've done before?"

Nissa thinks back. Every time before, the elemental magic had come so effortlessly. She now knows she was taking it for granted. She bats away a hail of dirt from above.

"There's gotta be something," Chandra urges. "What about when we channeled my pyromancy through Zendikar's leylines? If it beat an Eldrazi, it'll work here, right?"

"But…" Nissa's admission comes as a whisper, "I… I… I can't reach any leylines anymore."

"What?"

Nissa shakes her head, coughing from the dust cloud forming around them. "They won't listen to me. I tried. Many times. But when I call out to them, it's like my voice isn't my own. Like it belongs to Phyrexia instead, like everything I've ever connected to is drowning me out."

For once, Chandra pauses. "You know," she concludes. "You have good connections, too."

"What do you mean?"

"It's true—you did bad things while they had you. But everyone you've connected with over the years with the Gatewatch, we're just happy you're still here. With us." Chandra sets fire to a chunk of moist dirt that was about to fall on Nissa, turning it into a soft rain of ash. *"With me."*



For the first time since she awoke in Zhalfir, Nissa smiles. Chandra, sweet Chandra, even if she doesn't realize it, has always understood and explained emotions better than Nissa ever could.

Chandra continues, "Your connections aren't drowning your voice, Nissa. They're changing it into something new, maybe something even more powerful. Infinite voices, infinite possibilities, right?"

Infinite possibilities. Nissa offers her hand to Chandra. "All right, let's try."

Gripping Chandra's fingers in hers, Nissa closes her eyes. She retreats inward and listens for her inner voice. It's hard, much harder than before, but Chandra is dutifully helping her concentrate, blasting the falling rock away before it can reach her.

Nissa is greeted by ringing deep in her ears, but she refuses to be deterred. With her connections in mind, she picks the static apart into unique melodies, the individual songs she picked up from all around the Multiverse. She arranges them, harmonizes them, and this time, when she calls to Zhalfir, her voice is amplified in chorus. She offers an apology.

The plane answers. It too was cut off from everything it knew, from the connections it had made. It, too, was scarred by Phyrexia and is growing into something new. It forgives her, and Nissa can finally forgive herself.



*"Leyline Immersion", by Wisnu Tan.*

Magic floods her flesh, her blood, her bone. She hears Chandra laugh, delighted by their success.

Nissa uses the elemental power to reach out to the creature. It's an elemental, but one made of unknown power which neither Nissa nor Zhalfir recognize. But Nissa can sense its disorientation and confusion, trapped in an earthly form by Zhalfir's unfamiliar magic and trying desperately to return to the pure energy that created it. Kind of like Nissa. The answer dawns on her.



"Steam," Nissa announces.

"Huh?"

"It's a storm elemental, a creature made of magic. But it's from another plane, so it's struggling to tap into Zhalfir's power. I think we can give it the energy it needs if we heat it up."

Chandra winks. "Heat? Now that I can do."

Nissa lets Zhalfir in and directs its power into Chandra. Her vision becomes a blinding, shimmering green. But even if she cannot see, she can feel Chandra's hand in hers. It grows warm, warmer, until it is unbearably hot, but she does not let go.

Fire magic, like a miniature sun, coalesces in Chandra's free hand, so bright that Nissa can see it through the green. With their connection made whole, Nissa sees what Chandra sees, feels what Chandra feels. Chandra aims upward, and a solid column of fire catches the lightning creature in the face. Together, they watch the beast inhale.

Chandra pours heat and energy into the creature. Its molecules and magic begin to vibrate faster and faster. Its fur melts into vapor. The lightning seams on its body crack and expand, and the beast breaks into pieces that convulse so furiously they liquify and then evaporate. Jets of steam escape its fading form and rise into the air, coalescing into a rum-

bling thunderhead overhead. Nissa wants to believe the cloud is grateful with laughter.

She laughs. And when the green light fades from Nissa's eyes, she sees Chandra, hair ablaze and laughing, too.

Rain falls in the desert.

One by one, fat droplets from the sky coalesce together into a torrent. A torrent becomes a flood. Water fills the crevasse they are trapped in, buoying them up. Soon, they are floating together, watching the cloud move away to reveal a clear, night sky. Chandra, hair still on fire, looks every bit like a lantern on the water.

She watches Nissa, refusing to take her warm eyes off the elf for one second. "Love comes in a lot of forms. I loved Gideon. I loved Jaya. You asked me what kind of love I had for you. I didn't know how to say it."

Nissa's heart beats faster. "Then what would you say now?"

Instinctively, Chandra tries to move her hand while she talks, creating awkward splashes around her. "It's still hard to describe. When I saw you there, in New Phyrexia, I realized I wanted to save you more than I wanted to save the world. My love for you… It's like when you left the Gatewatch, came back to the Gatewatch—it's not perfect all the time, but I want to do my best."



"I don't understand. How can love change?" To Nissa, it seemed like such a straightforward emotion, with the same primal, immutable quality as magic.

Chandra looks away to hide her face, but Nissa can tell her cheeks are as hot as her flame. "Sometimes, you convince yourself it's better to do what's easy, assumed, natural… because it's easier than facing the unknown. Under stress you become who people expect. Throw that giant fireball instead of thinking first, you know? But you saw past that. Always. You made me better."

Emboldened by Chandra's vulnerability, Nissa musters her own honesty. "But you hurt me. I don't want to be left alone again."

"And I'm sorry. More sorry about that than anything I've ever done in my entire stupid life." Chandra turns to face her again, eyes bright with a new promise. "When I went to find Ajani, I realized he doesn't want to be found. He'll come back when he's ready. I'm still frustrated, of course, but I have to give him time and space. That's when I realized I can't just burn through any relationship I care about. Love leaves room for the other person to be who they are. I have to make room for you, too. I want to."

"Like fire needs oxygen…" Nissa asks her final question. "You have room for someone who can't planeswalk?"

"Yes. I'll make it. I will falter, I will be tempted, but I will make it. Fire's going to burn, no matter what you do, but you can shape it if you try. And I want to try. For you."

Nissa thinks for a moment. Finally, she nods. "I can handle that."

She leans over and places her hand on Chandra's neck, pulling the pyromancer toward her. Their eyes meet one last time before closing, and Nissa pulls Chandra into a kiss.

...

The sudden storm had caused a flash flood that stranded Teferi, Karn, and Koth in a cave a few miles outside the town. They were unable to return until the next morning after the waters receded. Nissa, Chandra, and the villagers welcome them back with blankets, warm stew, and smiles. Later that night, the friends celebrate the women's clever victory. This time, Nissa joins in. She and Chandra split the sweetest mango she'd ever tasted.

When the last bonfire dies down, Nissa takes Chandra's hand in hers and leads her up the hill overlooking the village. She waves at Wrenn before stopping in front of the portal.

"Here it is," she gestures, "the place where the creature came from."

Together, they gaze into the swirling blue light. Chandra asks, "Where's it go?"



"I don't know," Nissa admits. "Neither did Teferi, Koth, or Karn, for that matter. But when I listen, really listen, I think I can still hear Zendikar out there, strange and distorted, but possibly still out there. I could just be imagining it completely, but I think I would risk that unknown to see home again."

Chandra nods firmly. "And I'll be walking right alongside you."

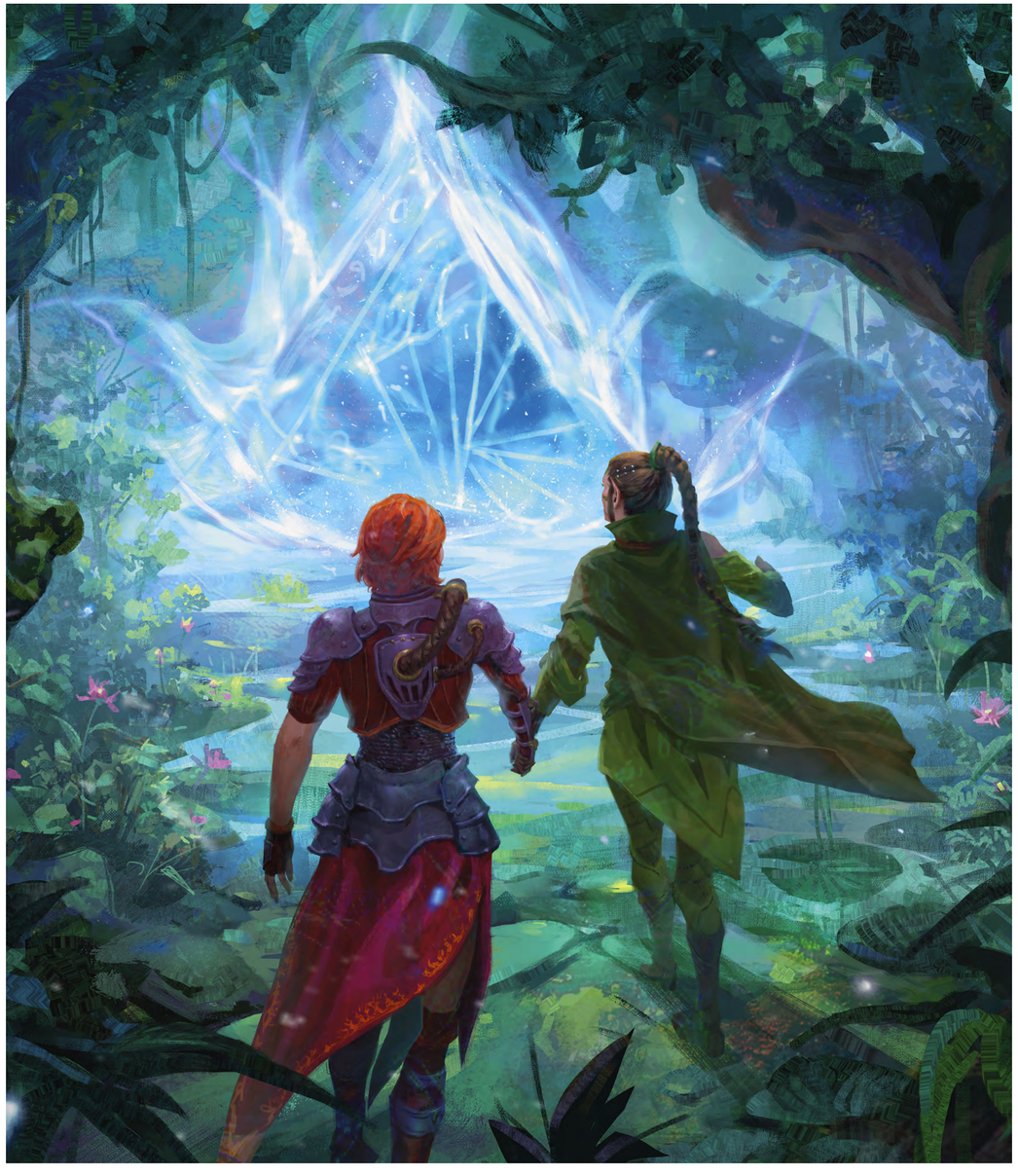
Every Planeswalker can go anywhere they want, but Nissa recognizes Chandra's need to roam runs deeper than that. It's part of who she is, and part of what Nissa loves. So Nissa offers, "Maybe, after that, I wouldn't mind seeing more. As long as it's with you."

Chandra breaks into a wide smile. "Let me be your torch, then. First stop: find your way home! Hey, we can even check in on that little forest you started a while ago."

They move toward the portal and each place one foot on the threshold. Nissa wavers and turns to Chandra. Just in case, she asks, "Are you sure you want to commit to a leap of faith?"

"Together? You bet."

Hand in hand, Chandra and Nissa step through the portal into just one of infinite possibilities.



*“Open the Way”, by Livia Prima.*

# EPISODE II
# Broken Beyond Repair

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BURIED UNDER A MOUNTAIN OF STONE AND STEEL,
NAHIRI DIGS HER WAY TO A NEW FUTURE—
FOR HERSELF, AND FOR ZENDIKAR.

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Deep within the bowels of what had once been the Emeria skyclave, Nahiri ripped the taint of Phyrexia from her world.

In theory, it was a straightforward process: remove the metal that had been grafted into the surroundings and leave behind nothing but the original stone. In practice, it was a nightmare. Compleation had fused stone and metal together on a molecular level, and disentangling the two took an excruciating amount of patient, intricate work for every handspan of metal. Fortunately, Nahiri had nothing if not time.

She'd lost track of how long she'd been down here in the dark. At first the lack of sight had been disorienting, but eventually her other senses had attuned to compensate, and now she knew every inch of her sur-

roundings. She knew the drip of water down stone, the cold hiss of wind through the corridors, the bloody tang of rust. She knew that she was alone.

The first order of business when she'd woken up to find the invasion over and herself somehow still alive had been to rip all remaining traces of metal from her body. The process had been painful, and bloody. Peeling off the metal had taken less than a day, but it had been several more before the wounds finished scabbing over, and weeks before the scabs all fell off. The entire time, she'd been on edge, expecting people to come looking for her. As time passed, Nahiri realized that everyone must assume she was dead—or rather, they didn't care if she was alive.

Well, that was fine by her. She had work to do.

Currently, she faced a tricky situation: she'd been working through a particular corridor for the last few days, but now her way was blocked by a wall of interlaced metal, all fused into the surrounding rock. The metal pieces were wickedly sharp; she'd cut herself exploring the shape of them. She'd have to dismantle it all before she could proceed further.

Wrapping her hands around a metal claw, she felt for the seam where stone and metal tangled together, coaxing the stone to loosen its grip. She tried not to dwell on how much effort it took. Every act of lithomancy cost her now, where before it had taken little more than a thought to shape stone to her will.



Then again, she was no longer a Planeswalker.

She couldn't say for sure what had happened. All she remembered was a blast of Halo searing into her, moments before the skyclave had fallen, with her still inside. Perhaps the Halo had been what had allowed her—maybe others as well—to survive after New Phyrexia's grip had fallen apart. Perhaps it was something to do with the fact that she had been fused into the skyclave itself. She didn't know for sure. All she knew was that she was alive, and hollow. The core of her power, her spark, no longer a part of her.

At first the pain of its absence had been so great she'd thought she would die, but over time, she'd grown used to the hollow ache in her soul. She'd grown to accept she was now weak.

Once she'd loosened the stone's grip sufficiently on the metal, she braced herself and tugged. The metal resisted—and then jerked so abruptly free that Nahiri stumbled and fell. She landed hard on her rear, and the claw came to rest with the point digging in just below her sternum, just shy of puncturing her skin.

Nahiri froze. Memories surged through her: how it had felt when the metal had been not just pressing against her heart but wrapped around it, when her soul had been melded to the glory of the machine. How pure

and untainted their vision of perfection, how glorious Zendikar could be through its salvation—

With a shudder, she shoved the thoughts away. They belonged to an entity that did not exist. That was the ghost of Phyrexia. It was not her.

It was *not* her.

The claw's tip scraped lightly against her skin as she wriggled out from underneath. Once she was free, she wrapped her hands around it, careful to avoid the cutting edges, and retraced her steps back through the corridor, letting the claw drag in her wake. The rasp of the metal against stone echoed all around her.

The corridor wound in a twisted upward slope. When the echoes changed, hollowing out, she knew she was nearing her destination. She slowed down and edged forward until her feet touched the edge of a cliff. If she took another step, she'd fall into the pit containing her masterpiece: a mountainous cairn of Phyrexian metal, all the pieces of Phyrexia she'd spent the last days, weeks, who knew how long, ripping out of the skyclave.

There was probably enough there by now to rival the height of Sea Gate itself, and she'd still only scratched the surface of what the skyclave contained. It would take months to rip it all free. Years, perhaps, but



she wouldn't rest until she had scoured every trace of the cursed metal from this place.

She'd have to figure out how to destroy it eventually. But right now, if she could pry Phyrexia's cold, alien grip off her world, that was good enough.

And after that?

She would deal with that then. But for now, this was all she could do. It would have to be enough.

Once upon a time she would have been angry. She would have raged against the Multiverse for stripping her of her power, for delivering this fate to her. But now where anger should have been, she felt only hollowness, and a grim weariness to see the job done.

She tossed the piece of metal into the dark and turned back down the slope.

…

Small skittering creatures scuttled through the dark: tough, scrawny thingsof too many bones and too little meat. Aside from Nahiri, they were the only living things in this place. Every now and then, she caught one in a fist of stone, crushing it and superheating the rock to cook it directly. The act of eating was tedious, but necessary. She found herself longing for the taste of kor cuisine. Not the cooking of recent centuries—the

hardy, straightforward campfire fare that kor caravans have been reduced to—but the more nuanced tastes of a culture the world had long forgotten, back when she was still just a mortal. She'd eat it again once she was done here, she promised herself, and didn't think about how long that might take.

The wall of metal came down, only to reveal another one behind it. She took that one down too to find yet another. Then another, and another. A vague sense of dread grew in her with every layer peeled away. This skyclave had been the heart of the engine meant to convert Zendikar itself; the walls must have been put up deliberately to protect some core component. They certainly wouldn't have been for decoration; Phyrexia was nothing if not efficient. Indecision and frivolity were weaknesses of flesh. It was nothing like a machine, pure and gleaming, incorruptible, *beautiful*—

Nahiri grabbed the closest piece at hand and *ripped* it free in a savage burst of lithomancy that left her body trembling and shaking, sensations she gladly embraced. Focus on the here and now. Don't think about what came before. Don't think about what you used to be.

*Don't think about what you did.*

At last the final wall came down, and she walked through to find herself in the chamber where she had bound herself into the skyclave itself.



She knew it as soon as she set foot inside. The room sang to her, stone and metal woven together like the weft and warp of fabric where she had been fused into the very walls. In that deliberate plaiting she could read Phyrexia's influence, how it had sought to take the material of this world and turn it against itself. Because that was what Phyrexia did best, wasn't it? Corrupt the essence of a plane, take your urge to protect and shield and twist it to serve their own ends…

A wave of dizziness and nausea swept over her, and she put a hand against the wall to steady herself. But for once, the touch of Phyrexian metal comforted her. It didn't matter what this place had been. Phyrexia was gone for good. Still, she walked the perimeter of the room, trailing a hand over the wall to reassure herself that the metal was, in fact, dead.

And then she brushed a section of the wall and felt a fluttering shock of power deep inside.

Instinct snatched her hand back. Her first impulse was to grab the surrounding stone and squeeze it inward, crushing whatever lay within. But the sensation hadn't been unpleasant. If anything, it had felt… familiar.

Cautiously, Nahiri placed her hand on the wall again. There it was, a little whorl of power embedded in metal and stone. Now that she was focusing, she thought she could feel the outlines. It wasn't too deep within the metal.

Curiosity battled with dread and won. She retreated to the outside corridor and shaped herself a blade of stone.

She cut slowly, channeling heat into the edge of the blade to melt the metal apart. The last thing she wanted was to damage the object she was trying to cut free, so she focused on the act, forcing herself not to think about what it might be…

Her blade touched empty air, and the object fell out of the wall and into her waiting hand.

She held a lump of stone the size of her fist. She ran her hands over it, feeling its contours. It was a hedron, if that hedron had grown in impossibly thin slices of stone layer by layer around a central seed, like an oyster laying down coats of pearl around a speck of grit. The whole thing felt delicate, like even an ounce of wrong pressure would crush them. As for the grit in its center…

It was her Planeswalker spark.

The feel of it was unmistakable. Now that she held it in her hands, she could feel the rush of power that it contained, that had been hers for centuries. She was suddenly, acutely aware of the hollow in her where her spark had once been, that emptiness she'd been trying so hard to ignore.



*Empty, because I poured everything I had into destroying my home. I burned myself out trying to save it from itself, because I believed I was doing right at that time.*

Her heart thudded in her chest like the strike of a hammer on metal. Something bubbled up in her that she hadn't thought she was capable of anymore.

Hope.

The weight of metal above, below, and all around her: suddenly it was suffocating. And the darkness. When was the last time she'd seen sunlight? How long had it been since she'd seen her home, seen Zendikar itself? She reached out, gripped stone in great grasping fistfuls, and with a surge of power, heaved.

Stone ruptured upward. Metal shrieked and peeled away in violent blossoms. The stone punched through the roof the chamber, and then up and further up, until, far above, it pierced the vaulted roof of the skyclave itself, a rough set of stairs that stretched from her feet all the way to the outside. Sunlight dripped into the darkness.

Nahiri sat down hard. Her whole body shook with exhaustion, and she had to swallow rapidly to keep from vomiting, but it was done. She had a way out.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw her body for the first time. She'd known she was scarred, of course; she'd felt them in the dark. But it was one thing to feel, and another to see the puckered white lines that striped her skin: the diamond pattern of the skyclaves seared into her where flesh had fused to metal, ripped free, then fused again, over and over. Overlaid against that coldly geometric precision were newer, harsher welts, where she herself had clawed the disgusting, beautiful touch of metal from her body.



*"Nahiri, Forged in Fury", by Marta Nael.*



She ran a finger along a jagged seam tracing down the outside of her right hand, all the way from the tip of her middle finger to her elbow. There had been a heart of metal in the stone blades grafted onto her hands, and right after she'd woken up, she hadn't yet figured out how to disentangle the two the way she did now. Even if she had, she wouldn't have cared. All she'd wanted was to rescue herself from Phyrexia's grip, no matter how much she damaged herself in doing so. Flesh could always heal, after all. It seemed like a small penance to pay for having failed Zendikar yet again.

She pushed herself to her feet. Her legs were still a little shaky, but at least her stomach no longer felt like it wanted to heave itself up her throat. The hedron fit snugly into her palm, as though it belonged there, and she supposed in a way that it did.

Nahiri began to climb.

The way up was longer than she'd anticipated; she hadn't realized just how far down she'd been. The light steadily increased the higher she got, until her eyes ached with the strain of it. By the time she emerged onto the skyclave's hull, her eyes were closed and she was feeling her way by stone sense alone.

The touch of wind on her face felt as alien as the air of a new plane. For a moment she simply stood there, trying not to flinch from the touch

of it. Even through the skin of her eyelids, her eyes hurt. It would take a while before she grew accustomed to seeing again.

Or was that the only reason she was keeping them so resolutely closed?

*Look, you coward.*

She opened her eyes.

The world was a blurred smear of light and color. Then the light ebbed, and Zendikar resolved itself into existence.

She almost howled at the sight. It was worse than any wreckage the Roil had ever caused, worse than when the Eldrazi had eaten their way through Bala Ged. Sinew and metal extended as far as she could see, warped and rent with rivers of oil. She saw all too plainly the brute force of Phyrexia at work, the blind bulldozing of native earth, eager simply to spread compleation as far, and as fast, as possible. The scope of it was almost unfathomable. This wasn't something that mortals could fix; this was a problem for gods.

And she'd thought she could dismantle it, one insignificant piece at a time.

Bitterness curdled in her belly. Gods, had she really convinced herself she was doing something meaningful down there in the skyclave, plucking at scraps? She might as well have tried to separate the sea back into



its component rivers. Her useless little pickings were nothing compared to what Phyrexia—no, what she had accomplished.

Seeing Zendikar, she could no longer deny it: this was her doing. Phyrexia had wielded her like a hammer, but she had still been the one to strike, to bring Phyrexia's weight down on her home. This was her fault.

The scars on her arms pulled taut as she curled her hands into fists. Well, maybe she'd been part of the problem before, but she was done with hiding like a coward. Now she was going to fix things, return them to the way they'd been before. Which meant, first things first, finding a way to restore her spark.

In the light of day, the hedron's translucent delicacy looked even more impossible, the layered slices of stone a three-dimensional palimpsest that caught the sunlight and fractured it into an iridescent rainbow. This must have been a protective barrier of some sort, an instinctive protection her spark had grown to protect itself while it was being used to fuel the skyclave engine. Somehow, she had to find a way to extract it and fuse it into herself again. She would leave this place and find whatever allies she still had on Zendikar—Kesenya, perhaps. Nahiri had helped Kesenya start her expedition house, and that was a debt the other woman was sure to acknowledge, even if their current relationship was less than ideal. And Kesenya had connections to expedition houses across practical-

ly every continent. Even if she didn't know what to do, she'd be able to point Nahiri in a promising direction.

The plan crystallized in her mind, chasing away some dark fog she hadn't realized was there. A sense of purpose filled her. It felt good to have a goal in mind again. She should have left the skyclave ages ago.

She heard it before she sensed it, the displacement of air like a hard exhale. A breeze ruffled her hair. She spun around, knowing before she did what was coming.

A Planeswalker.

The irony of the situation didn't escape her: that a Planeswalker would come hunting her down now, at this moment. She'd made a lot of enemies in her travels through the Multiverse and she was weak. If it was Sorin who had come seeking her, or Jace…

But the figure who appeared in front of her was larger than any she'd expected, with a strong feline face and white fur covering his entire body. A scar ran through the left eye socket.

"Hello, Nahiri," Ajani said.

For a moment, Nahiri could only stare, feeling an undeniable sense of relief that the Planeswalker she had sensed wasn't one of her enemies. In fact, Ajani was the last person in the Multiverse she would have expect-



ed to see. She barely knew him. When she'd last seen him, it had been as Elesh Norn's most faithful evangel, her most favored lieutenant. The leonin who stood before her now was not plated and seamed with porcelain. Now he was just… himself. Flesh. Untainted.

And still a Planeswalker.

She blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "What are you doing here?" It emerged a rusty, hoarse croak. It had been a long time since she'd spoken.

"Isn't it obvious? I came looking for you." His eyes moved over her. She met his gaze steadily, challenging him to say something about her appearance. "I thought… I expected to find you dead."

She smiled humorlessly. "Disappointed?"

"Surprised." His whiskers twitched. "The others are dead, you know."

"Who?"

"The others." When she didn't respond, he continued, "Tamiyo. Lukka. Jace and Vraska too, I would guess, except no one's found their bodies yet."

The other Planeswalkers who had been Elesh Norn's evangels. A roster of those who had led the charge against their home worlds. The syllables of their names clawed her ears. "And Nissa?"

For a long while, Ajani didn't answer, long enough that Nahiri thought he wasn't going to. "She survived as well," he said at last, "but she's been damaged. I don't know what happened; some part of the process when we were cleansed of Phyrexia, but she can no longer planeswalk. I can, but… it took everyone. Teferi, Kaya, Melira… so many others. They saved me. They cleansed me of the taint of Phyrexia and kept me intact." A shudder passed through him. "The others... weren't so lucky as you and I."

Nahiri kept her hand curled around the hedron, hiding it from sight. He was clearly still sensing her spark, even though it was no longer in her. If he wanted to think she was still a Planeswalker, she saw no reason to inform him otherwise . No reason to reveal any sign of weakness, not with that strange look on his face that made him look... guilty, she would have said. But about what? "Who sent you?"

"What?"

"You can't have come on your own volition. Who asked you to find me?"

"No one." He sounded surprised. "I just wanted to see what had become of you."

"Well, if that's all you came to see about, you can be on your way. I'm fine." She walked over to the edge of the skyclave hull and peered down. Her first step would be to get back down to ground level. This side was steep, but she could make handholds for herself to climb . Luckily, the



skyclave had crashed into a flat plain, so at least she wouldn't have to fight through tangled forests or thickets. Before, she never would have had to care. She could have simply willed herself wherever she liked.

*Soon,* she promised herself.

The back of her neck prickled. She turned to find Ajani was staring at her. "What?" she snapped.

"Are you?" he asked.

"Am I what?"

"Are you really fine?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ajani said nothing. Some of the initial relief she had felt faded, replaced with unease. Something about this wasn't right. No one came looking for her unless it was for a purpose, and in her experience, those purposes had rarely been benevolent. "Look, I'm fine. So if you don't mind, go away and leave me alone. I'm busy right now."

"Healing Zendikar, correct?"

She bristled. "And if I am?"

Another silence. Nahiri realized she was tensing her entire body, and forced herself to relax. Ajani's whiskers twitched. "I have a proposal to make."

"I'm not interested," Nahiri said at once.

"Will you not even hear me out?" The words were still soft, but there was a growl to them, a gleam in his eye. Anger or threat, Nahiri didn't know, and she didn't have to; the danger was clear.

She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Ever since things ended, I've been traveling the planes, and the scope of destruction we wrought. I'm sure I don't need to tell you the untold damage to the Multiverse. Someone needs to make amends for what we've done. To fix things." He took a deep breath. "That could be you and I."

It took a moment for his meaning to sink in. "You want me to… join you? Be your partner in fixing the Multiverse?" An incredulous laugh slipped out of her. "You have others who would willingly assist you. They saved you, didn't they? Go ask them instead. I'm sure you have plenty of friends who'd jump on the chance to do so." Despite herself, she couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I told you already I'm not interested, so you can go off and save the rest of the Multiverse. In fact, you're welcome to it. But you leave Zendikar alone. This is my home, not yours. I'll repair it myself, without your—your meddling."



He shook his head in irritation. "This isn't just about the Multiverse. It's also about us. No one else faced what we did. We're the only ones left who knows what it's like to go through… what we went through."

"What we went through," Nahiri repeated. "You mean as Phyrexians." The word was sour in her mouth. She made herself say it anyway. Ajani flinched. "Nissa knows."

"She's also no longer a Planeswalker." Nahiri's grip on her hedron tightened. "She never saw the aftermath of what we wrought. Out of everyone in the Multiverse, you and I, Nahiri, are the only ones who can truly know the sins we committed. That's why we must be there for each other. We need to help each other, for our own good. And we can't do it alone."

Nahiri scowled, not bothering to hide her annoyance. She'd always considered Ajani somewhat high-handed, the way he assumed he knew what was best for everyone, but this was too much. "I never asked for your help," she snapped, "and I won't be a balm for your guilt. You'll just have to learn to live with it instead."

His ears flattening against his skull. "Do you think I'm here on a whim?" he growled. "This thing must be done. We bore the sin of it here, we must be the ones to fix it. Whatever it takes." And when she didn't respond, he continued, voice softer but unsteady now, "Doesn't it haunt you, what we did? I remember everything as a… a Phyrexian." It seemed to cost him

to say that word. “Every evil act, every memory. It’s there, intact. Is it the same for you?”

Abruptly, she saw herself, kneeling on the neck of a skyclave elemental, anointing it—no, drowning it—in oil. How she had blessed—cursed—corrupted—everything she touched, dragging Phyrexia in her wake in a glistening skirt. How she had believed with all her heart that she was saving her world from something worse. A bitter, metallic taste flooded her mouth. Furious, she shoved the memory away. “I’ve already told you to leave me alone, what about that don’t you understand? Why are you still here?”

“Because I want to help you,” Ajani snarled. “How many times must I repeat myself?”

Nahiri glared, but even as she did, a cold, trickling awareness filled her. Ajani was a Planeswalker, and still in full control of his powers. To come all this way, just because they’d both served together under Elesh Norn, was ridiculous. No one in their right mind would willingly want to dwell on that time.

What if he was here to kill her?

If he was, then it all made sense. His presence here. The way he kept pressing her to dwell on her time as a Phyrexian—he could be trying to destabilize her emotionally, making it easier for him to surprise her with



an attack. Ajani had been Elesh Norn’s strategist, the most ruthless and loyal of her evangels. Phyrexia changed your allegiance but not the core of who you were. That single-minded purposefulness, that capacity for ruthlessness, had to have come from Ajani himself.

He had come to Zendikar seeking her out specifically. He had wanted to find if she was alive. He could very well have determined to seek out all the former evangels and end them, to cleanse the world of Phyrexia’s taint. Whatever it takes, he had said. He was right about one thing, if nothing else: they had caused a lot of damage. From what she knew of Ajani, he was not one to let such wrongs stand if there was something he could do about it.

It was something she herself might have done as well, if she could.

Lukka, she thought abruptly. Tamiyo. Vraska. He hadn’t said how they had died.

He hadn’t said who had killed them.

As subtly as she could, she reached out with her power, flooding the skyclave hull all around her. He’d made a mistake, giving her forewarning. If he was planning to kill her, she would at least be ready for it. She might not be a match for him, but she could at least slow him down long enough to—hopefully—escape.

If he'd realized she'd seen through to his true motive though, he gave no sign of it. He was pacing back and forth now, short, sharp bursts of restless motion, his tail lashing from side to side. "We need each other, Nahiri, whether you want to admit it or not. I know what it's like to be where you are now. Who else can say that? Who else will truly be able to comprehend the darkness and self-loathing of what you've done? Who else will understand?" He stopped abruptly and swung to face her again. A note of pleading entered his voice. "Let me help you heal—and help me heal. "

Disbelief flashed through Nahiri. Heal? *Heal?* With her world wrecked, her spark torn from her, and her body reshaped in ways that would tell the tale of Phyrexia's claws in her until the end of time? While he stood there, looking unscathed by the ordeal, looking *whole*? But of course he would. He'd had friends to pull him out from the mess and patch him up and take care of him, whereas she—she had only ever had herself.

"Don't you dare tell me what I need, you miserable cat," Nahiri hissed. "You don't know the half of what I've gone through. You don't know what's been done to me. You don't know what sins I've committed."

"*So talk to me.* I *want* to help you."

"No," Nahiri spat. "Who are you to come here and lecture me about what I should or should not be doing? What gives you the right? You and



your friends are what got me in this state—" She swept a hand over her body. "—in the first place. If you want someone to talk to about all this, go find Nissa. Or Chandra, she's your friend, isn't she? Why aren't you crying on her shoulder?"

Another flinch, this one sharper. A dangerous growl rose in Ajani's throat.

Nahiri knew she should have stopped then, but a recklessness had seized her. The edges of the hedron dug into the palm of her hand, the pain a sharp, focusing clarity. "I was only involved in this mess because of your weakness. Do you think they would've had to call on the likes of me if the great Ajani Goldmane hadn't fallen? Hadn't stood at Elesh Norn's side and told her exactly how to beat them? You slaughtered the gods of Theros. You murdered Jaya Ballard. And now you want to stand here and tell me how I should atone?"

A look of fury suffused Ajani's face, and a full-throated snarl ripped him, an anguished sound more animal shriek than anything else. His claws unsheathed, and Nahiri didn't have to guess at the expression of murderous grief on his face.

She yanked on the stone around her, flinging it between the two of them. She'd only meant to form a wall, something to slow him down while she scaled the skyclave's hull, but then stone buckled under her feet, and she realized she'd overestimated the strength she'd needed. She had the



*“Reckless Handling”, by Miguel Mercado.*

space of a breath to realize the mistake she’d made, and then the dome of the skyclave collapsed beneath her feet.

The last thing she saw was Ajani’s eyes widening in alarm as he lunged toward her, one paw outstretched, mouth open to shout her name.

She fell.

...



A jagged smear of light soared distantly above: a hole in the roof of the skyclave, a tear in the fabric of the world. At first, surfacing from unconsciousness, Nahiri could only stare. The hole was so distant that it didn’t make sense. Surely she should be dead after having fallen so far. And yet here she was, still alive somehow, through sheer luck and nothing else.

She tried to sit up, and nearly screamed as her shoulder flamed with pain. She put a hand to it and touched a shard of metal, a claw that had pierced through the back of her shoulder and out the other side. Phyrexian metal. She had fallen on the cairn she herself had created.

She almost couldn’t make herself reach over and grab the metal. The pain when she pulled it free made her yell. But then it was out, and she lay there, shoulder throbbing and her nose filling with the smell of blood. She could do it. Pain was a temporary state of being. Flesh could always heal. As soon as she was a Planeswalker again, this would be nothing more than a distant memory—

Her hands were empty. Where was the hedron?

Nahiri bolted upright, eyes already darting across the cairn. She’d been holding the hedron when she fell, which meant it had to have fallen with her... yes, there it was, nestled in a curve of jagged metal halfway down. She crawled toward it, metal edges biting into her hands and knees.

As soon as she picked it up though, she knew something was wrong. The slices of thin, fragile stone that had petaled around the core were cracked, and even the ones still intact looked duller, rougher. It must have been shattered in the fall. She couldn't feel her spark at all.

For a moment all Nahiri could do was sit there and stare. Whatever essence of herself had been infused in the stone was there no longer. Her last hope at regaining her power—at becoming a Planeswalker once more—was gone. All she had left to fix Zendikar with was herself: powerless.

She would have laughed, if she didn't think it would break her apart.

She let the hedron drop from her hand. It tumbled down the side of the cairn, and she didn't bother to see which way it fell.

By the time she finally emerged back to the top of the skyclave, the pain in her shoulder had settled into an insistent throb. She had to step carefully; the whole of the skyclave's dome felt fragile, and she was so exhausted and half-blind with pain that she couldn't have reinforced so much as a single tile. Ajani was nowhere to be seen.

Nahiri was aware of an emotion building within her, something deep and warm and familiar. There was grief, that long, slow sorrow for her world that had suffered so much and been broken so many times. But beneath that was something even hotter, and more familiar.



Anger.

She could see it all so clearly now. The real threat, the real problem, was not herself. It was not even Phyrexia. It was Planeswalkers. This was what Planeswalkers did. They went to a new plane, wreaked havoc on it, then departed without further thought for the damage they caused. Just as Ajani had come here, seeking her for his own selfish purposes, ruined her last chance of truly healing Zendikar, and then ran away, leaving her to deal with the consequences of his actions.

She should know. She used to be one herself.

Nahiri clenched her fists, feeling her nails bite into her palms. The fury felt good, the warmth of it comforting and familiar. Anger she knew. Anger she could harness, could use to fuel more works in the future.

And she knew what she needed to do next.

If not for Planeswalkers, Phyrexia wouldn't have been able to reach across the Multiverse, and Zendikar wouldn't have been blighted as it had. Sorin and Ugin would never have been able to bind the Eldrazi in her home, all those thousands of years ago, and awaken the Roil. As long as people like them existed, her home would always be under threat.

Zendikar had always been able to recover from the ravages that had been wrought on it. But even worlds grew weary, and sooner or later it



*"Nahiri's Resolve", by Alexey Kruglov.*



would encounter something—or someone—that broke the heart of it beyond all repair.

Not if she could help it, though.

She was done with hiding away in the dark. She might not wield the power she previously had, but that didn't mean she was helpless.

There were still things she could do. Still ways, perhaps, to close Zendikar off from outside forces who would do it harm.

Nahiri looked out over the wreck of her world, her beautiful, blighted, broken home. She would protect it until her last breath. She was still Zendikar's guardian, after all. She would always be Zendikar's guardian.

"No more," she breathed. "No more pain. No more suffering." Her voice hardened with furious conviction. "Whatever it takes, I swear. No Planeswalker will set foot on Zendikar ever again."

