

Episode 3: Don't Look Back

Mira Grant

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Winter walked across the small parlor, moving with an almost rolling gait, like he was crossing the deck of a moving ship, not an unmoving house. Niko watched his feet, making note of the way the man's seemingly careless steps managed to avoid stepping on any of the moth motifs woven through the faded carpet. Looking up again, they studied their new acquaintance for a moment. Nothing about him was as casual as it seemed, from the way he walked to the strips of wallpaper worked into his clothing; if he held still in the right light, close enough to the right wall, he would all but disappear.

If nothing about him was coincidental, had his presence in the freezer room been a coincidence? Or had he engineered it, the way he was engineering his walk across the floor, stepping with precision?

And did it matter one way or the other? Whether Winter had encountered them by chance or by design, he had saved them from the creature he called a razorkin. That bought him a little trust, at least until he showed himself to not deserve it. Decision made, Niko began to follow him.

"Stop!" said Winter, twisting at the waist without moving his feet; they remained planted firmly where they were, in the blank spaces formed by the rug's design. "Don't step on any of the moths!"

"The ... moths?" asked the Wanderer politely.

"In the carpet." Winter gestured to the room around them. The warmth, which had seemed so soothing when they first emerged into it, was quickly becoming sweltering; whoever last fed the fire had stoked it a bit too enthusiastically, and as the chill seeped out of their bones, it was being replaced by an uncomfortable heat.

Niko followed the sweep of Winter's hand, frowning as they noticed that the moth motifs in the carpet continued up into the wallpaper. Some of the framed pictures on the walls were entomological diagrams of moths they almost recognized, species they'd seen flitting around the temple braziers on Theros. The rest were unfamiliar, united by their oddly shaped wings marked with rough-sketches, watching eyes. The whole room felt like it was watching them, through the moths. There were no windows.

The Wanderer continued to watch Niko, an almost perplexed expression on her face. "Are you going to explain *why* we shouldn't step on the nicely woven moths?"

Winter exhaled, the ghost of a laugh clinging to the sound. "I knew you were new, but I didn't think you were *that* new," he said. "How did you survive long enough to reach the Floodpits? Duskmourn should have had you long before you could get that far. Unless the House isn't hungry, but if the House weren't hungry, it wouldn't be setting lures."

"What are you talking about?" asked Niko, a cold pit opening in the bottom of their stomach. Every plane had its ambush hunters, the great anglers who dangled a lure that looked like a worm or a spider or an entire human body, using it to coax prey close enough to catch.

"You came here through a door, didn't you?" asked Winter. "A door you'd never seen before, that didn't belong wherever it was you found it? And it wasn't locked, and it opened easily when you tried it, and the House was on the other side, like an invitation to adventure. Like it wanted you to come in and look around. But when you tried to turn around and go, the door wasn't there anymore. You belong to Duskmourn now."

"You said that before."

"I'll say it a hundred times if that's what it takes for you to understand."

"Duskmourn is the House?"

Winter nodded fiercely. "Yes."

"And the House is ... aware? Intelligent? It hunts?"

"The House is aware; whether it's intelligent or not has never mattered enough to care about. You don't ask the thing that's trying to swallow you whole whether it understands what it's doing—if it understood enough to care, it would have listened to you screaming for it to stop."

Niko looked around the room again. It felt more ominous by the second, the heat less like a roaring fire and more like the sickly warmth that radiated off a fresh dragon carcass, something living and looming. The eyes of the moths in the walls were a weight against their skin, making it clear that they couldn't escape notice even if they tried.

Instinctively, they reached for the warmth of their spark—not to flee, not to leave their allies behind, but to cup it in the hollow of their will, to feel its reassurance and know that their fate was not yet sealed. And, as had always been the case since the invasion, they found nothing where that tiny flicker of the Blind Eternities should have been, only void, a vessel too broken to contain anything but dust.

They recoiled from the sensation—not an easy thing when the feeling was anchored to their soul—and returned their attention to Winter, who was still watching the Wanderer from his place by the fire. How could he stand so close without overheating?

"We didn't come through the door because we were lured," said the Wanderer. "We came seeking a child who has been lost, although he wouldn't thank me for referring to him as such. His mother was—she was also lost, in a different way. I have a responsibility to him, and when I discovered that he had entered your 'Duskmourn,' I had no choice but to follow. My friend here agreed to come with me."

"Just the two of you, hunting this cursed place for a single kid?" Winter scoffed. "You know, there are easier ways to die."

"Stop that talk," said Niko. "Our fates are not sealed. We have allies in the House, and as soon as we find them again, we'll be able to get out of here." Kaito was still a Planeswalker, his vessel unbroken, and even if he hadn't been, the square box Niko had been given by Niv-Mizzet was still hanging over their shoulder, humming contentedly to itself. Small lights blinked at one corner. It was transmitting information back to Ravnica. Help was coming.

Help was coming, and they were far from helpless, even in this strange place, with its unfamiliar rules. Winter was looking at them like they had made the biggest mistake the world had ever known by coming here, but they hadn't arrived by mistake: they'd been looking for Nashi. An innocent, who needed their help. Niko had no more been able to refuse than they were able to cross the Blind Eternities under their own power.

Winter scoffed again, only to freeze as the Wanderer was suddenly in front of him, having crossed the floor with quick, graceful steps that evaded the moths woven into the rug seemingly without effort.

Her sword, which had been belted at her hip, was suddenly in her hands, the blade only inches from Winter's face.

"It would not be wise to threaten a new ally," said the Wanderer. "So this is not a threat. Only a promise. Don't taunt us over things we have no way to know. Do we understand one another?"

Winter nodded slowly, eyes fixed on the gleaming blade of the Wanderer's sword. He didn't begin to relax until she lowered her weapon and returned it to its sheath.

"The House is a hunter, you say, but this time, it may have bitten off more than it can chew," she said.

"You won't be the first one to think that," said Winter, still looking uneasy, but less so with every passing second. "Duskmourn has swallowed heroes and villains without a hint of hesitation. You think you know how to survive here, because you survived wherever it was you came from. Well, you're not seasoned heroes here. You're seasoned meat. You say you have allies in the House? Were you separated, one by one, by impossible things?"

The Wanderer grimaced. "The floor opened wide and swallowed our companion," she said.

"That was after we heard someone screaming for help in the distance, and two of our companions went running after it," said Niko. "They went through a door into a hallway, and when we tried to follow them, there was a wall there. We didn't see it appear, but it can't have been there when they left."

"That's Duskmourn, splitting you from your friends," said Winter. "It's one of the House's favorite tricks. It wants you isolated and afraid. The more frightened you are, the more the House desires you. You must have reached the threshold of fear it needed to start sending razorkin after you, back in the freezer. It knows you're here now, if it didn't before."

"What *was* that thing?" asked Niko.

Winter shrugged. "A survivor once, most likely. Duskmourn repairs and rebuilds the people it takes, the same way an upholsterer might re-cover a couch. It beguiles the ones who manage to survive in razorkin territory until they lose themselves and slide into a slaughterhouse skin. If you're lucky, when they catch you, they kill you. If you're not lucky, you get to join them. I don't know how much they understand of what they are, but they can be clever, and they're relentless once they have your scent. That miss back there was narrower than you think it was."

"And they're how this house hunts?"

"Not just the razorkin," said Winter. "The House has many hands, and it won't stop grabbing for you until it has you."

"Or we escape," said the Wanderer.

Winter looked at her like she had no idea what she was saying. "Sure," he said, voice dry. "Escape."

"I thought we were being polite now," said Niko.

"Yeah, sorry, sorry," said Winter. "Look, you're basically beacons for every hungry thing in this house while you're so hopeful and sure of yourselves. Stick with me if you want to stay alive, and maybe we'll be lucky enough to find your friends."

"But you don't think we will," said Niko.

"I've seen this play out too many times to think you're getting a happy ending," admitted Winter. "Still. Stay together; don't trust anything you see to stay the way you think it is; don't touch the moths, even when they're just chalk drawings or someone fingerpainting with someone else's blood."

"I wouldn't touch that even if you hadn't said something," said Niko.

Winter cracked a smile at that. "Move fast and try not to linger in open areas," he said. "Assume everything is hostile and has the potential to do you harm. Everything but those." He stabbed his finger into the air, indicating a spot next to the Wanderer. She blinked, then turned.

There, floating several feet above the parlor floor, hovered a golden dragon etched entirely of light, moving in a sinuous curve as it hung in place. The Wanderer gasped. "Kyodai?" she asked, then corrected herself: "No. I wouldn't wish her here. This spirit is too small to be my dear one. What is this?"

"Your glimmer," said Winter. "Everyone in Duskmourn has one. It's your hopes and dreams—or whatever's left of them, anyway. I think the House makes them. No one really knows."

"Where's yours?" asked Niko. "Where's *mine*?"

Winter only shrugged.

"My Kamigawa," breathed the Wanderer.

Niko said nothing.

"We shouldn't stay here any longer," said Winter. "The only reprieves Duskmourn offers are brief ones. But if we follow her glimmer, it should lead us along a relatively safe path."

"Can it take us to Nashi?" asked the Wanderer.

"Only one way to find out," said Winter.

The Wanderer leaned in toward the floating spirit. "Please," she said, and the glimmer began to swim through the air to a doorway on the far wall.

The others followed.

Kaito fell without a sound, pulling on every ounce of his training to remain as calm as possible while he was dropping through the dark. Himoto's claws dug into his shoulder as she anchored herself, refusing to be separated from him, and the fall was long enough to allow a flicker of amusement: He might be the only one who'd fallen, but he still wasn't alone in the House. Himoto was with him, as she always was, as she always would be.

Just as it seemed he must be destined to fall forever, his descent ended with in a hard impact with what felt like a forest floor. Rocks and roots dug into his hip and side, and the smell of wet loam filled his nostrils, thick and earthy. He blinked, then sat up, rubbing his eyes as he assessed himself for injuries.

Given how far he'd fallen, he should have broken several bones, or at the very least knocked himself unconscious. Instead, he ached like he'd just done a long training session against a superior opponent without any protective gear. It was jarring. Not that he *wanted* to be in pain, but the implications were unnerving.

How much control did the House have over what happened inside it? He stood carefully, still surrounded by total darkness, and began to breathe deeply, in and out, trying to use his remaining senses to orient himself. The smell of loam dominated everything, a thick layer across the smell of a decaying pine forest, its trees broken and dying in the absence of the sun. There was a cool dampness to the air, and a sharp scent of petrichor mingling with the trees; fog, then, the kind of thick fog that blanketed an entire forest floor and turned it treacherous even under the best of circumstances.

As he breathed the forest in, the darkness began to lift. It wasn't an improvement. Revealed, the forest was just as unpleasant as Kaito had assumed; the nearest trees were rotted and leaning against each other, giving the impression that they were just waiting for an excuse to fall. The trees that weren't on the verge of coming down looked sick and listless, if listlessness could be attributed to a tree; their branches drooped, and patches of lichen dotted their bark, gray and scabrous.

Kaito shuddered and looked around, Himoto shifting on his shoulder to direct her eyes along with his and provide a little extra light.

"How does a house have a forest *under* its ballroom?" asked Kaito.

Himoto chittered.

Before Kaito could decide which of the many unpromising directions looked the least unpleasant, a shadow passed over him, and he tensed, crouching and looking up at the same time. Whatever it was, it was too high to see in the dark—while the forest was no longer draped in absolute blackness, it was still about as bright as a moonless night, without even stars for the shadow's source to block. The shadow swooped by again, this time accompanied by a brilliant burst of flame that illuminated the entire beast that had been circling overhead. The fire chewed at the rotting trees, turning them to ash, as the dragon flapped its wings and circled for another pass.

Kaito looked frantically around, the way now lit by the fire devouring the trees. There was nowhere to go. He could go deeper into the trees, but the trees were burning.

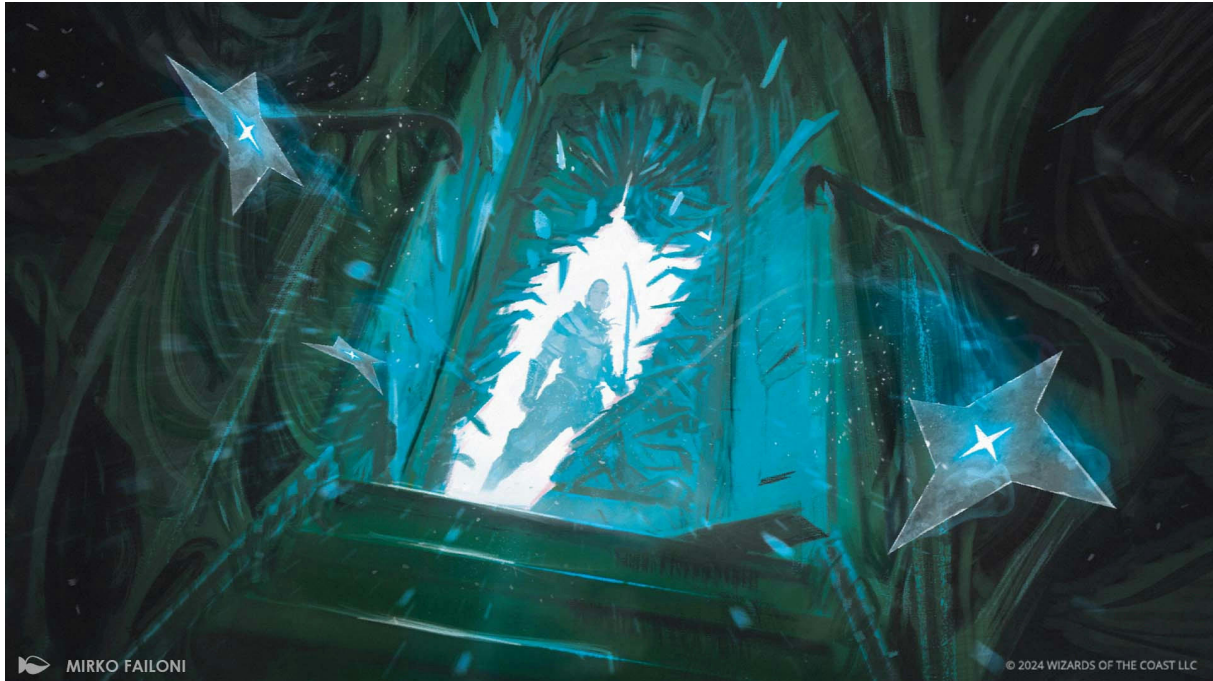
It was better than standing still waiting to be baked alive. He began to walk as quickly as he dared across the root-twisted ground, feet hidden by the fog. He hadn't made it very far before the dragon swept by again, this time directing its fire at the motion on the forest floor. Kaito had barely a moment to realize the depth of his mistake, and then the dragon's fire was sweeping over him, blisteringly, blazingly hot, turning the world white and gold with flame—

And then it was over, and he was standing in the middle of a smoking, ash-strewn plain, surrounded by the remains of the burned-out forest. Something about the moment felt wrong, the way it did when Teferi used his time magic, and close on the feeling of relief came the feeling that all this had happened a very long time ago, if it had happened at all; it was a performance being put on for Kaito's benefit—or for the House's.

The fire had burned the fog away. Dragons wheeled through the sky overhead, dozens of them, their attention fixed on a burning city. Occasionally, one or more would dart toward the inferno, adding another stream of fire to the damage already done. Not that there was much left to burn. Nothing moved apart from the dragons, and flames. If the city had been occupied, its occupants were gone now. The sky was still dark, ripe with heavy gray clouds that crackled with lightning, filling the air with the smell of ozone.

Himoto chittered. Kaito put a hand on her back, lending them both comfort, and waited for the dragons to return.

There was a sound like someone slicing through shoji with an improperly cleaned sword, rough and ragged and grating, and the landscape began to flicker and fade, moving in and out of visibility as if transforming all around him. The sound of ripping paper grew louder, then stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The forest was gone.



Art by: Mirko Failoni

Instead, he appeared to be standing in an underground room with rough stone walls and a staircase in one corner, leading upward to an unseen destination. Piles of furniture and boxed-up belongings lined one wall, and the only light came from a flickering girandole hanging from the center of the ceiling. Its candles were almost burned out; soon enough, the room would return to darkness.

And he wasn't alone.

Zimone's dissertation on the movement of air wasn't wrong; his training *had* involved learning how to know when someone was nearby just from the changes in the atmosphere around him. He tensed, more worried now than he had been by a mystery forest filled with phantom dragons. This was something physical, something that could potentially do him harm.

Something that was moving closer, trying to be quiet, but still approaching.

Kaito tensed further, controlling his breath to keep it light and easy, and when the feeling of presence drew too close, he whirled, driving his right fist square into the face of the slender, dark-haired man who'd been walking up behind him.

Jace made an undignified squawking sound and stumbled backward, clapping one hand over his nose, which was already gushing blood. "Hello to you, too!" he said, voice muffled by his hand and injury.

Kaito blinked and straightened, not lowering his fists just yet. "Jace?"

"You were expecting someone else?"

"I wasn't expecting—what are you *doing* here?"

"You're not happy to see an old friend?"

Kaito stared at him. "An *old friend*?" he asked. "Last time I saw you, we were trying to kill each other on New Phyrexia!"

"Where you prevented me from stopping the Phyrexian invasion before it could begin. I'd call us roughly equal."

"I did it to save Kamigawa from the sylex *you* were trying to activate."

Jace shrugged, the gesture so thoughtlessly dismissive that Kaito's fists tightened. "It would have worked if we'd been faster, or if we hadn't been separated."

"You're the reason we lost Nahiri!"

"I lost *myself* at the same time, in case you've forgotten."

Kaito narrowed his eyes. "I haven't forgotten anything," he said. "Where have you been?"

"Does it matter? I'm here now."

"Yes, I'm going to say it matters. It matters very much."

Jace sighed, removing his hand from his nose and wiping the blood on his cloak. "I don't think it's broken, if *that* matters to you."

"Want me to try again?"

Himoto chittered, almost like she was encouraging Kaito to take another swing.

Before he could, a groaning sound rang through the basement, seeming to pour out of the very walls. Jace and Kaito both stiffened, instinctively falling into position back to back as they braced against the coming danger.

"Fight later?" asked Jace.

"Fight later," Kaito agreed. "But we *are* going to fight."

"I look forward to it."

The library had remained a library, to Zimone's delight and Tyvar's disappointment. He hadn't tried the stairs again, preferring to stay where he could watch over Zimone. The academic seemed to have forgotten that they were in possibly mortal peril; she was happily wandering from shelf to shelf, pulling out an endless succession of books and handing them off to Tyvar to carry to the large study table she had claimed for her research. Really, it was like seeing her in her natural environment—an environment which he presumed had very few predators, as she was completely at ease now that she had accepted her surroundings.

He sat sprawled in the chair next to hers, elbow propped on the table and cheek resting on his knuckles. He would have been happy to explore, if it hadn't meant letting her out of his sight. In this place, he didn't trust she'd be there when he came back—whether due to perfidy from the House or because she'd just wandered off into the deeper stacks, he couldn't have said.

Tyvar Kell was not a man well-suited to an academic setting. Every inch of him screamed that they were in the middle of a grand, terrible adventure, filled with danger and the chance for glory. But "what is this place" and "how is this happening" weren't enemies he could punch. All he could do was make sure Zimone was safe, or as close to it as any of them could be in this terrible house.

Zimone frowned at something in the book she was reading, then shoved it away and pulled another toward her, eyes darting across the text with remarkable quickness.

"This *is* a house," she finally announced.

Tyvar frowned at her. "I thought that had been established."

"It was, but that didn't mean it was going to stay established. Sometimes when you test a thing, you find out it isn't what you thought in the beginning. It's called camouflage."

"I am aware," said Tyvar. "We have such concepts on Kaldheim."

Zimone's cheeks flushed red. "I didn't mean—I'm just excited, that's all. This is a house, it was built, the original architect lived here with her family, a long, long time ago, at least if I'm reading this correctly. It looks like the place has had at least a dozen owners. I had to find one of the early ones to confirm the architect."

"That's a bit of a relief," said Tyvar. "Things made by hand are often easier to overcome than those made by nature."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but this library is pretty focused. There's some local history—none of the names are familiar, even from the Biblioplex; I don't think this is a place any of us have ever been before—but mostly it's occultism and the kind of magic that makes Professor Vess recommend you rethink your academic goals."

"Bad magic?"

"Magic isn't inherently good or bad any more than a mathematical equation is, but some of it is so based on entropy and weaponized obligation that bad magic is probably the best way to describe it." Zimone looked back at her book, shaking her head. "I don't know why anyone would want to study this stuff, but look, someone studied it pretty hard."

Tyvar looked, obligingly. The book she was looking at now had extensive notes in the margins, written in dark ink with a strangely effervescent hand, as if the one who made them had treated this as a marvelous game. "Do you think this ... academically unpleasant magic is the reason the House is behaving in its current manner?"

"I'd be shocked if they weren't related," said Zimone. "Some of these spells are the sort of thing that could distort space and time if you cast them in the right order, and I'm not really sure how some of these rituals would even *work*."

The monitoring device she had been given by Niv-Mizzet beeped, the sound bright and out of place in the library. Zimone patted the box with one hand and kept reading.

A fleshy ripping sound, moist and visceral, echoed from the nearest corridor of bookshelves, not seeming to grow any quieter as it moved away from its source. Tyvar straightened, attention snapping toward the sound. "Zimone?"

"I think if you drained an entire person's lifeforce, you might be able to—"

"*Zimone !*"

She lifted her head. "Hmm?"

"Your college education is *not* preparing you properly for survival," said Tyvar, knocking his chair over as he stood and faced the sound. The bookshelves were beginning to ... twist, almost, warping into strange, asymmetrical shapes. The books were warping with them, becoming something entirely new. It hurt his eyes to watch, and so he didn't allow himself to look away. Something that distorted the world as it approached was something that *wanted* you to look away. He wasn't going to make them easier targets.

Zimone squeaked and scrambled to her feet, moving partially behind Tyvar as he stepped forward, toward the distorting patch of space.

"Stay back!"

"I approach no closer than needed," he assured her, even as something terrible ripped itself out of the twisting hole and launched for his chest.

It was technically bipedal, with skin the color of old, dried clay that had been exposed to the elements for too many years. It had no hair and wore no clothing, but it had six eyes, clustered on its face like the eyes of a spider, and a mouth that opened too wide to be functional, bristling with teeth like shards of broken glass. Its limbs bent in too many places, and it moved with a horrific, spidery grace.

It slammed into Tyvar's chest, claws digging deep into bare shoulders as it twisted to rip his throat out. He twisted at the same time, using the creature's own momentum against it as he flung it over his shoulder, opening deep gashes in his own skin in the process, but leaving his throat unripped.

"Tyvar!" shouted Zimone.

"Stay where you are," he yelled back, and threw himself after the creature. It roared and squared up to meet him, oddly jointed limbs moving easily to find purchase in the surrounding shelves. The distortion it had emerged from was almost faded now, the bookshelves slowly easing back to normal, but the shelves it had anchored itself against were starting to warp. The twisting was a function of the creature, then, and something to watch for.

Zimone grabbed her monitor from the table, hugging it to her chest. The creature's head snapped around, attention caught by the motion, and its eyes fixed on her. Smoothly, it began to turn in her direction.

Marble busts of humans and elves had been shoved into some of the gaps on the shelves, serving as bookends and adding a haunted quality to the library that Tyvar could easily have done without. He grabbed the closest of them, feeling the structure of the stone bleeding into his skin, and flung the bust as hard as he could at the creature's head. This wasn't a friendly throw, or even the sort of throw he would have aimed at a wolf that wandered too close to the village flock: this was a throw designed to do as much damage as possible.

The bust burst against the beast's skull, and it lost interest in Zimone immediately, whipping around to resume snarling at Tyvar. He clapped his hands together, stone still spreading up his arms, until it had encased the wounds in his shoulders and stopped the bleeding.

"A Planeswalker spark is too much for one heart to hold; it makes you complacent," he snapped. "I've been working on my legend since mine blew out."

The creature snarled again and leapt for him.

This time, he was braced. He grabbed it by the wrists and swung it around, slamming it into the floor before kicking it in the side of the head. It hissed and snarled. He planted a foot at the center of its chest, keeping it where it was.

"She's not for you to harm," he spat.

The creature snarled again. The sound was somehow hollow. Tyvar raised his foot, stone spreading down his body, and when he felt it close over his ankle, he stomped down as hard as he could, driving his foot through the creature's sternum. It splinted and broke like a rotting plank, and the beast went limp. Tyvar sneered, releasing its wrists, and turned to walk back over to Zimone, the stone fading from his skin.

"That ... how ...?"

"The natural world answers to my call," he said. "I used to need a fragment of the material close to hand to shift my skin, but now I can carry the memory with equal closeness."

"Well, that's great, but look."

Zimone pointed behind him, hand trembling. Tyvar turned.

The creature was pulling itself back together, chest expanding, blood beading up and rolling back to the body, where it poured back into the creature's rapidly sealing wounds. With a whining grumble, it got back to its feet and snarled at them.

Tyvar paled.

Zimone grabbed his arm, tugging. "Maybe we should run," she said.

"Brave deeds only carry honor when recounted," said Tyvar, and together they turned and fled deeper into the library, away from the snarling creature, into the shadows of the shelves.