

All the Cairns of Jund

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Far from Zendikar lies the fivefold world of Alara. Ages ago, Alara was divided into five separate worlds, each of which evolved its own customs, life forms, and forms of magic. On the dragon-worshiping shard-plane of Jund, shamans and warriors braved the tar pits and jungles, trying to stay alive amidst an endless cycle of predation. Necromancy was unknown on Jund, being the sole province of the hellish shard of Grixis.

With the coming of the Conflux and the reunion of the shards, however, all that changed. Death magic came to Jund . . . with a vengeance.



The acrid smell of sulfur burned at her nostrils. Underfoot, sharp, dry grass bristled against her well-worn boots as a hot blast of wind swept across the valley. *Savage. Instinct. Fire* . The words flickered across her mind as she scanned the horizon, taking in the untamed vistas that made up Jund. The wild pulse of the land thundered through everything here. It rumbled beneath the hooves of massive beasts with tough hides and sharpened tusks. It echoed in the roaring of distant dragons. It reverberated in the rumbling of volcanic peaks threatening eruption—and on more than one occasion in her memory, they'd made good on that threat.



Savage Lands | Art by Vance Kovaks

Another word attempted to creep across her thoughts, slithering up from hidden recesses of memory. It caught in her throat and hooked at her heart, and she tore it from her mind, casting it aside, a fleeting shadow of a once-bright flame.

Home.

She stepped forward, leaving the word behind, a discarded bone picked clean by scavengers of darker thoughts.

This was not home. Not anymore.

It's so . . . green.

She looked at the vial before her, its contents pulsating with a strange phosphorescent glow. The wizened old shaman holding it gazed back at her, wispy gray hairs dancing wildly in the wind.

"We of the Circle of Nel Toth anoint you, Meren, child of stone and blood and bone, with the Dreamfire Draught." The old shaman's hand trembled ever so slightly as she held the vial out. Young fingers met old ones creased and spotted with age as she took the vial. Her gaze shifted from the potion to the shamans encircling her. She scanned the familiar faces of the Circle, finding her master, Kael, sitting tall and proud, watching closely.

She stood a little taller to match.

“Drink, and prepare yourself.”

Doubt nibbled at her thoughts. Her whole life had led toward this moment, to this trial that would prove her worthy of a seat as a full-fledged shaman. Yet she had always struggled, always chased the shadows of her peers as they seemingly sprinted past her in their training. Spells that came so easily to the other young shamans baffled her. They seemed to wield life magic intuitively, while she struggled just to hear and find the pulse, much less channel and shape its form.

Focus.

The word reverberated in her thoughts, and she instinctively looked toward Kael again. The tall shaman wore a neutral expression, but his eyes locked with hers, glimmering with pride and hope. Kael believed in her strength, despite her struggles.

You are not weak. You are Meren, shaman apprentice of the Nel Toth. You are a channeler of living magic, a wielder of blood and bone. You are on the dawn of your twelfth year of life, and you have a long way to go—but I have seen you fight to survive. Focus, Meren. Flourish. Triumph.

She took a deep breath in. She would be one of the apprentices who completed the trial, or she would die trying.

She tried not to think about the numerous other apprentice shamans who did, in fact, die trying.

No turning back now.

She tilted the vial against her lips and drained it of its contents.

It was done.

It had taken her all morning. The work was slow, the magic required still new to her—a freshly crafted obsidian blade, its weight still unsure in the warrior’s hand.

This weapon would be far more deadly than a sword, however.

She had been slow and methodical in her work. And though she was still inexperienced, the magic she shaped flowed naturally through her, almost subconscious in its rhythms. She was no longer the struggling child, grasping at power that slipped awkwardly out of her hands. The spell she cast, though new to her, felt heavy with age and power, and she knew as she neared its completion that she was successful. Around her, the sludge of the bog flowed away in rivulets, pushed by the sheer force of mana gathered around her. Swamp water and dreck gave way as her weapon took shape, re-formed and extracted from the eons that clung to its once-mighty form.

She admired its beauty, its ancient perfection. All throughout Jund, she knew great forces like this lay dormant, waiting for rediscovery. She gazed upon its shape: a sleek instrument of death, returned to its former glory—no, made *greater*—by her hand. Almost certainly, it had a name once—lost to the bygone years. She would give it meaning anew.

“Skaal Kesh.”

Her voice rumbled with a gravelly weight that surprised her. It didn’t occur to her until just then how long it had been since she last spoke words out loud.

“You are Skaal Kesh . Unearthed and bound to me.”

She spoke again, her voice gaining strength, her hands shaping into intuitive gestures, binding the weapon to her magic and her will, one single word echoing in the chambers of her mind:

Vengeance.

Everything inside her burned.

Instantly she understood how the Dreamfire Draught got its name. Delirium and nausea hit her, a solid wall of dizziness plowing into her consciousness and threatening to knock her off her feet. Her insides felt like a master shaman had lit her up with banefire—inexplicable, searing pain racked her body. The vial dropped to the ground, but she did not even notice.

Poison.

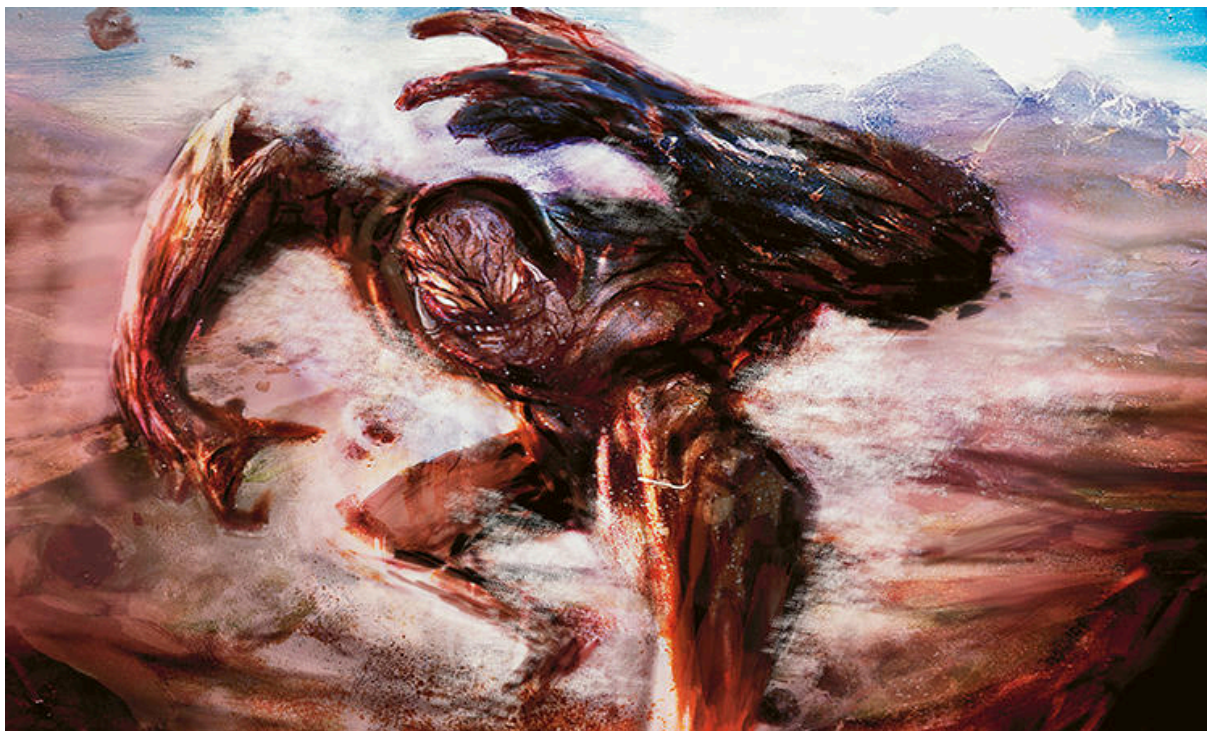
The word leapt to her mind, and she knew it to be true. It was clear—without intervention, the Dreamfire Draught would kill her. She tried to breathe through the pain, tried to wrest control of her muscles as they spasmed against the concoction coursing through her veins.

At the same time, she heard the hum of voices rising and falling, their tones overlapping in a pulsating rhythm. The Circle was chanting, she realized, weaving a spell in tandem.

Then she looked forward.

Before her, coalescing from the earth, a massive elemental reared up. Snaking vines wound their way around boulders snapping into place, forming strange and thick limbs. She peered up at the monstrosity. The being towered easily to fifteen feet, its enormous frame casting her into shadow. With a crackle, the large stone that comprised its head split, revealing a jagged mouth. Flickers of static bolts danced across its rock-fangs, leaping above to alight into two eyes.

The elemental reared back, its aurochs-sized forearms stretched wide, and its gaping mouth yawned open, letting loose a primal roar. It smashed its forelimbs down, sending shockwaves rumbling through the ground as its lightning eyes gazed down at her—small, frail, insignificant.



Rockslide Elemental | Art by Joshua Hagler

“Commune with the spirit, child!” The elder shaman shouted above the now howling wind, her voice cutting surprisingly clearly across the noise. “Bind it to your will.”

Right. So this was her test. Commune. Connect. Bind. Command.

She turned her full attention to the elemental, and slowly raised her hands, a practiced chant already tumbling from her lips. The Dreamfire Draught burned hot in her veins, and she realized it wasn’t just a poison—the potion augmented her senses, even adding a few new ones. She could see—just a little—the elemental energies that extended beyond the creature’s physical body. She could feel the pulse of mana feeding its existence.

All it cost her was her life force.

Such was the shamanism of Nel Toth—blood and flesh sacrifice as raw materials for savage power. She knew she needed to bind this elemental, and quickly. With the power of the elemental, she might be able to purge the poison before she was consumed from the inside out. Or before she was consumed from the outside in by the unbound, wild elemental itself.

She was beginning to understand why the ascension rate of new shamans was so low.

She reached a tendril of her energy out toward the elemental. First contact. A greeting. She gritted her teeth, holding steady despite the burning in her veins, despite the stinging of the winds, despite the loud drone of the Circle’s continued chant.

Hello.

She spotted the Nel Toth hunters long before they saw her. Two warriors and a shaman, picking their way through the brush. She watched as they made their way across the terrain, coming closer to her hidden perch. The earth-tone garb. The familiar shape of their weapons. A tingle ran down her spine.

It's been so long. It was all familiar yet foreign, things once intimate made strange by intervening years. It seemed incredible, almost unreal, seeing them now, here, in living flesh. The tribe yet survived.

That was about to change.

The first warrior was dead before he knew what happened. Green fire erupted from his chest, burning fierce and hot. Within seconds, his entire body ignited, collapsing in a heap before a scream could escape his lips. The second warrior let out a yell, leaping back and drawing his blade, eyes desperately searching for an enemy. Instead, he found a bone dagger piercing his chest. She leaned into the blade and against his back as she pressed it further through his sternum.



Jund Battlemage | Art by Vance Kovacs

A torrent of fire roared her way, and she pivoted, throwing the warrior in the way to take the brunt of the attack. As the fire abated, she pulled her knife back and pushed the remains of the warrior forward, another scorched corpse hitting the ground. She looked up as the remaining shaman charged, letting loose a scream of rage. The shaman raised her staff as she ran, summoning two thornling elementals—quick, vicious, sharp.

Meren watched the shaman's approach, taking a step back while wiping the blood from her bone blade with a finger. She quickly drew a glyph on the wrist holding the knife, finishing just as the thornlings leapt at her. With a quick flick of her hands, the two elementals burst aflame with green fire then disappeared into fine ash, blowing away on the wind.

The charging shaman cried out in anguish but didn't slow, drawing back her staff, fire sparking around the teeth and bone jangling wildly on the end—when a charred hand reached up and grasped her ankle. She fell hard, staff flying out of her hands, hitting the ground with a crunch, her wrist snapping under the sudden impact.

The shaman looked back in horror at the immolated, blank eyes of the dead warrior staring lifelessly at her, glowing the same putrid green as the fires that consumed her elementals. The warrior's other

arm reached out and grasped the shaman's leg, the bone of fingers poking through where flesh had melted away, digging in and piercing skin, eliciting a horrified scream.

Through all of this, Meren stepped closer, watching the panicked, struggling shaman with cold contempt. Another sickening crunch rang out as she stomped down hard on the shaman's injured hand. The shaman howled in pain, writhing to free herself, until the bone blade flicked against her jugular.

"Where are they?"

The shaman looked up into cold grey eyes, blank of emotion. "Abomination!" she hissed. "What foul magic do you—"

The shaman's words turned to a gurgle as blood welled up, bubbling out of her mouth and pouring out of the gash where the bone knife had neatly cut through her throat.

She stood, again wiping the blood from her bone blade with a finger. With a gesture, she commanded the dead warrior to release the shaman's ankles and stand. With the bloody finger, she drew another glyph, this one far more complex, on the back of her dagger hand. As her fingers finished tracing the pattern, a green glow permeated the shaman's corpse. The shaman rose from the ground and stood haltingly. Blank eyes, now tinged green, stared at Meren.

"Where are they," she asked again. "Where are the new convening caves of the Circle."

The shaman made a sound that seemed like an attempt to speak, but all that escaped was a low hiss of air. Blood slowly bubbled from its slit throat.

"Point," she commanded.

The shaman stared back for a moment. Then, slowly, slowly, its hand raised, and an earth- and blood-caked finger gestured east.

"Lead." The shaman slowly began to walk.

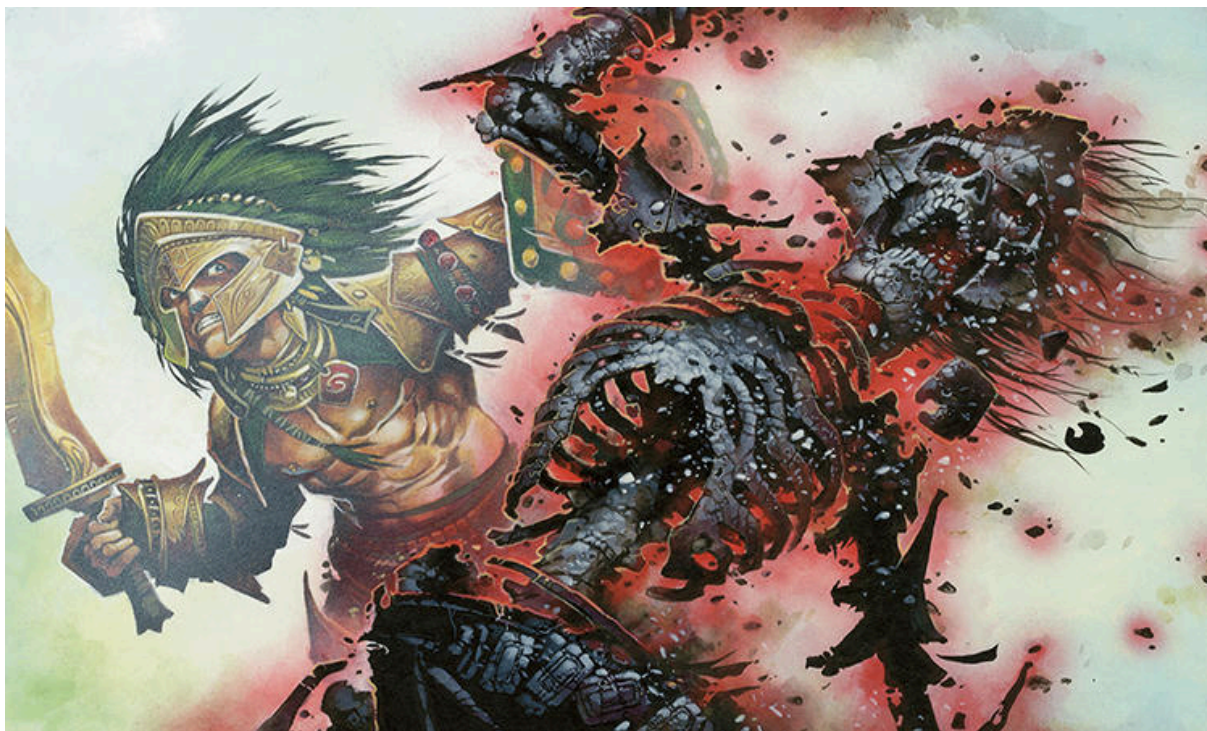
"Wait." The shaman stopped.

Meren gestured to the staff lying on the ground. "Retrieve your weapon."

The shaman bent and struggled to pick up the staff with its one good hand.

She watched for a moment, amused, then gazed back at the last warrior. The green fire had consumed most of the flesh, but some sinew and skin still clung stubbornly to the bones. She shrugged. *Waste not.*

She reached a hand out and called to the magic in her veins. The experience from crafting of the weapon that morning, along with the blood bonds she cast now, made animating the skeleton easy in comparison. She wouldn't even need any physical viscera for this spell.



Terminate | Art by Wayne Reynolds

The skeleton rose as the shaman finally succeeded in getting a good grasp on its staff. With a gesture, the party again marched, the shaman in the lead, flanked by the two warriors. Meren followed a few paces back, sheathing her knife.

Vengeance begins.

This is the end .

She spat blood from her mouth and ran a hand against her lips, breathing heavily. One eye was swollen shut and an arm dangled, useless and broken. Her vision was mostly gone, everything reduced to blurry patches. Her body was beyond pain, her insides felt like a melted jelly slush, and she suspected the only reason she still held onto consciousness was due to the very thing that was killing her from the inside.

Things hadn't gone so well with the elemental binding.

To put it mildly.

Her greeting, her tendril of mana to initiate contact, did not have the effect she expected. Sure, she had never been good at the summoning or binding of elementals. But she had never had an elemental react with the rage that this one had.

As soon as she made contact, the elemental recoiled with a roar, then swatted her away with a vicious swing of its limb—which happened to be an aurochs-sized boulder. The speed of the assault caught her off guard, and she was sent sprawling, the arm she threw up in defense instantly broken. The only good news was the new pain had momentarily dulled the constant burn of the poison coursing through her veins.

She had struggled to her feet, winded and coughing, gazing frantically to the Circle for any clue or guidance. The open looks of shock on many faces was no comfort. She looked to Kael. His face was as stoic as ever, but his clenched fists gave him away. A loud bellow drew her focus back on the elemental as it

primed itself to charge. She tried to breathe, to center herself, and a new sharp pain told her a few ribs were probably also cracked, if not broken.

Don't panic. Focus. If a willing bond cannot be negotiated, a forcible chain must be forged.

It didn't matter that she had never succeeded in binding an elemental against its will before, much less one of such size. She had to succeed. She will succeed. She would not perish here.

Nearly thirty minutes later, it seemed like she was wrong. She would perish today. It was only force of will and a generous dose of luck that kept her alive. The few binding rituals she knew didn't come close to having the power needed to chain the wild elemental, even with her abilities augmented by the Dreamfire Draught. Now, she cowered within a dome of stone she had raised around her as the elemental raged and smashed from the outside. Chips of rock rained down on her with each reverberating blow, and she knew her shelter would not last long. Even if it did . . . another twinge in her gut reminded her of the other clock she fought against. It looked like death by wrathful elemental would get her before death by willingly imbibed poison.

Yet, more horrible than the threat of death chipping ever closer was her dismal performance before the Circle. She not only failed to bind the elemental, all of her shamanic spells and attempts at the binding were sloppy and weak. Even with the Dreamfire Draught beating through her veins, she still struggled to hear the pulse of Jund, the heartbeat of life magic that she was supposed to wield. This stone shield was her most successful spell, and only because she used her own spilled blood to augment its power.

You are not weak.

Despair and anger churned in the pit of her stomach. Kael was wrong, apparently.

Another crashing blow, and a beam of daylight pierced into the dome. The end was nigh.

But it was not yet here.

She breathed, pushing air into her battered lungs, ignoring the protests of her fractured rib cage. She breathed, centering on the wild beating of her own heart as entry into a deeper pulse, the pulse of life, of fire, of Jund. She breathed, and time seemed to slow as she strained to listen, to grab hold of the elusive rhythm, to tap into the pulse of magic for one final attempt at . . . something. Anything. She listened, straining, seeking power, seeking the surge.

A rush, then silence. A rush, then silence.

She frowned, her brow wrinkling. She had always struggled to catch that rush, the surge in life force that all shamans tapped for their power. She had always fumbled, trying to synchronize her words and gestures with the pulse, its timing foreign and ungraspable to her. But now, as she listened, as she felt her own life draining away, the roaring gaps of silence between the rushes called to her. The lack of sound, the infinite void, pulled her in. She never noticed that space, the quiet ever-present darkness, quite as she did now. Its expanse seemed wider, she realized, more ever-present than the rush—it took up all the space that was not the pulse, that was not life.

A distant boom and the crackle of breaking stone reminded her that time still flowed outside herself. The otherworldly feel of hot Jund air and sunlight against her skin told her that time was up. She had to do something, now.

She reached into the darkness, and pulled.

The Circle was certain they were witnessing another failed shaman trial—and a spectacular one at that. The young girl somehow provoked the elemental she was charged with binding, which was in and of itself

quite unusual. The trial was not supposed to be one of combat, but rather a race against time. Instead, this trial somehow devolved into a young girl trying to fight a fully enraged avalanche elemental.

When the girl forged a stone shelter using her own blood as conduit to enhance her spell, a few sat forward, intrigued. A few murmurs of her tenacity and resourcefulness rippled amongst the Circle.

No one was prepared for what happened next.

As the elemental tore away a large chunk of the stone dome, a flash of green beamed out from within. A second later, a pillar of emerald flames erupted, spouting high into the air. The massive column of fire flickered wildly—but there was no blast of heat, no fiery burn, no roar, no pulse. The Circle looked on in horror at the unnatural fire. The avalanche elemental stumbled back, also watching the flames.

Then it turned and attempted to flee.

The flames flared down and the silhouette of a girl emerged, hidden behind sheets of green fire. The Circle saw hands raise—and fire danced out in a jet at the elemental. Some shaman would claim later they saw the flames flicker into the shape of skulls as it barreled through the air, catching the avalanche elemental in its tracks.



Meren of Clan Nel Toth | Art by Mark Winters

A tortured shriek rang out as the fires enveloped the elemental. It writhed, bathed in jade light, withering away. Within seconds, it was done. Boulders and stone crashed into a heap of rubble. The fire had devoured the vines, lightning, mana—anything living. Nothing remained but a heap of broken rocks.

All eyes pivoted to the girl, just in time to see her knees buckle as she collapsed.

Muffled voices echoed loudly in her head as swirls of senseless colors floated by her. She swam desperately upstream against exhaustion and delirium, fighting back toward consciousness. She had tried to channel a fire spell like Kael taught her, only pulling from the void instead of the pulse. She had no idea if she

was successful, but she was still having thoughts, which meant she was alive, which must have meant something good happened.

Focus. FOCUS. Open your eyes.

Slowly, slowly, her body acquiesced. Her eyelids fluttered open, heavy and lethargic.

The scene that greeted her was . . . confusing.

Two shamans of the Circle stood over her, eyes hard and staring, their staves pointed at her. Behind them, she could see the blurry outlines of others engaged in heated argument. Their words still sounded muffled, a garbled mash of syllables. She willed her brain to separate out the words, shaking her head to try and clear some of the haze of the Dreamfire Draught.



Corrupted Roots | Art by Mark Hyzer

“Do not move.”

She looked at the end of the staff, confused. The shaman holding the weapon glared at her, and she could see mistrust in his eyes—and also a glimmer of fear.

The arguments ceased, and she felt the weighty gaze of the Circle upon her.

“I say we kill her now.”

The words from an unseen voice rang out with clarity, piercing the haze in her brain.

“That was . . . I don’t know what that was. Certainly not life magic.”

“Her power is undeniable, though,” another voice countered.

“But she destroyed an elemental!” A third voice. “Not banished. Not defeated. Annihilated.”

“Did you see the way it rejected her initial binding?”

“It knew.”

“She’s unstable.”

"Dangerous."

The second voice spoke again, more urgent. "But powerful. Have you ever seen anything like it? She could become a great shaman—"

"She is no shaman."

That last voice. She knew that voice.

Kael.

"We bind life. We preserve balance. That fire was not of shamanic nature."

She turned to look for him, but the shaman standing guard juttred his staff into her throat, stopping her movement.

"She is an abomination. She'll never be a shaman. "

All had fallen silent save the shrill whistle of the wind and Kael's booming voice. She saw shamans move aside as he stepped forward through the people, into her view. His eyes stared into hers, unmoving, unyielding, cold. Droplets of moisture hit her hands, and she realized she was crying.

"We must kill her now."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the members of the Circle.

Kael raised his staff. She lowered her eyes. Even when she thought she found success, she failed. And here she was, betrayed by the one who believed in her, who thought her worthy and strong, even when she did not believe it herself.

"You cannot kill her."

All heads of the circle turned to look at the unexpected speaker. The elder shaman, the one who administered the Dreamfire Draught, leaned on her staff, hair fluttering wild as ever.

"The trial is still not over."

"She killed her elemental. It is over," Kael countered.

"The trial ends only when the young one purges the Dreamfire Draught, or when she succumbs to the eternal dream." The elder shaman's words were simple, but they reverberated with the magical weight of ancient ritual.

"She is an anomaly. Dangerous," Kael pressed on.

"We will not let her break our traditions and our oaths. You will not sully your hands." The elder held Kael's gaze until he looked away.

"Besides, she is not long for the living."

The Circle again turned to look at her, and she stared into the stony ground beneath her, hating her rattling, uneven breath for betraying her and confirming the elder's words.

The elder spread her arms wide, addressing the whole Circle. "Let her conclude the trial alone. May the draught consume her mind and dragon whelpings consume her flesh, much as her fires consumed the elemental."

The elder held her staff high in the air. Slowly, one by one, each member of the Circle joined her gesture in consent.

Soon, Kael's staff was the only one that remained by his side.

The elder shaman nodded in acknowledgement of Kael's dissenting vote, then turned to leave. One by one, the shamans of the Circle followed, until only Kael remained with her.

She again looked up at him, waiting for him to crack a smile like he did, what seemed eons ago, when he first chose her, first spotted the flare of magical potential in her. He looked back, unmoving.

"Die, Meren. Die quiet and alone."

Kael turned and left.

She did not die.

It would have been easy. Sprawled on that flat rock bed, poison coursing through her veins, burning up the last of her life. Discarded, broken and alone, abandoned by everything she knew.

But something in her had awoken. She had found power. She had found strength.

She had found *focus*.

In the silent space between. In the dark, hushed void. She had found it, a force as natural as breathing. Like the other shamans, for whom casting with the pulse was easy, she had finally found her true calling, in the midst of her trial.

And they had consigned her to death for it.

No. She did not die. She did not cower and break. She refused.

On that day, she did not need to struggle to fit their rules anymore. Kael was wrong in the end. She was a shaman.

She was just a shaman the Nel Toth had never seen before.

She did not die, for on that day, she wielded death itself. As a weapon, manifest as flame. Then, as a source of sustenance to her own life, reshaping the inky fabric between heartbeats. On that day, she closed her eyes, returning again to the place of infinite silence, and drew on the cool darkness, calling upon her newfound well of power to quench the Dreamfire burning in her veins.

She had dragged her body, broken and beaten, to shelter, and began the slow process of healing. When the cold grasp of death clawed at her, she did not panic or fight as a life shaman would. She caressed Death's hand with her own, familiarizing herself with Death's embrace. When passing beasts threatened, she called upon Death like an old friend, taking down game she only dreamed of hunting in her former life, all with mere thoughts and flicks of her hands.

And when her physical wounds healed such that she could walk, she left.

Left the rocky highlands, the fiery volcano peaks. Walked through the dense brush of the lowlands. Trudged through the marshy swamplands, until she had left it all behind.

She continued through the bog, following the call of the darkness. In it, she found focus. In it, she found purpose. *Grow strong. Embrace power. Seek vengeance.*

Jund was too noisy. The ever-present pulse, the beat she worked so hard to hear before, was now a loud throbbing ache, ceaseless in its cacophony, interrupting the sweet silent darkness. She sought a quiet place, a shadowy corner of the world—a place empty of the living.

Her march was slow. It took her years of searching, but eventually, whispers of strange patches of deadlands began to reach her—places where entropic death gales replaced hot Jundian winds and

where no beasts could survive. Places where corpses somehow walked again, climbing out of tar pits and crawling from the depths of swamps. The first time she found such a place—a squat little patch of swamp where the ground itself was somehow more like decaying flesh than natural soil—she knew she had found her anchor. There, in that alien blemish intruding on her world, was the familiar darkness, a brief respite of silence among the clamorous din of Jund. Her spells flourished there, and she sought out more places like that one, larger patches of dead earth, places where demons replaced dragons as lords of the realm.



Grixis Panorama | Art by Nils Hamm

In her journeys, she encountered others like herself, mages who wielded the darkness, who called themselves by another title—*necromancer*—and the land itself by a strange name—*Grixis*. She learned their skills and defeated their undead, for she had something they lacked—understanding of the living. While they simply animated the corpses of the dead as soldiers and weapons, she learned to revitalize the deceased—to Borrow the individuals from death itself.

And now, years later, she had returned. Now, she marched back from the grasps of *Grixis*, back through Jund with singular purpose. Now, three of her Borrowed Ones had led her to the current dwelling of Clan Nel Toth's shamans.

Now, she brought death to those who had tried to deliver it unto her.

Vengeance is almost too easy, she mused as she strode through the camp. The two Borrowed warriors had dispatched the young shaman standing watch, preventing the raising of any alarms, while her Borrowed shaman summoned its own elemental thornlings to assault the Circle. The result was a bloodbath. Nel Toth shamans scrambled in surprise, attacked by their dead friends and vicious elementals they assumed were allies. With each fallen shaman, her ranks grew, as did the chaos and panic. It was all she could do to keep pace with raising the bodies.

In the madness, she hunted for one face in particular. She wanted to make sure he didn't die at the anonymous hands of a Borrowed. She wanted to see his face, to witness his fear, to make him regret.

She needn't have worried.

Three massive torrents of fire swept across her growing ranks, melting flesh and bone alike. She shielded her eyes, at the same time enshrouding herself in protective shadow, and willed the Borrowed to stand again.



Skeletonize | Art by Karl Kopinski

As they rose, however, the fires persisted, melting away sinew and reducing bone into an inanimate charred mass.

She grinned. Only a master shaman of Nel Toth could sustain such a blaze.

Indeed, stepping through the flame, two elder shamans wielding staves heavy with dragon fangs and talons of thrinaxes strode forth. They flanked a tall figure, stoic and harsh. Streaks of gray now ran through his hair, and his face held more lines than she remembered, but beyond that, Kael looked unchanged.

“Your rampage ends here, death mage!” Kael roared. “Clan Nel Toth will not fall before such Grixis scum! Your kind has crawled here before, only to end in blood and ash.”

“I’m disappointed you don’t recognize me, Kael.” She lowered her shadowy defense, revealing her face. She watched as his brows furrowed. She reveled in the slow dawning of recognition, savored the flitting twinges of shock behind his eyes.

Kael raised his hands to cast, but she was faster. Two screaming skulls made of green fire burst from her palms, smashing into the two elders on either side of Kael, immolating them in pyres of flame. She grinned as she watched them burn—a grin that transformed to surprise as the two shamans seemed to ignore the fire, walking then breaking into a run toward her. She focused on the duo, intensifying the fire still burning their flesh, but they remained unfazed, charging forward, their forms shifting from humans into beasts. Suddenly, she found herself facing down a massive bear and a long-fanged thrinax, both alight with flames that should have killed them on contact.

The bear swung a massive paw at her while the thrinax tried to clamp onto her legs. She ducked out of the way of the first assault, but powerful jaws managed to ensnare her calf, sharp teeth tearing into her flesh, and she cried out in pain.



Scarland Thrinax | Art by Daarken

Before the thrinax could pull back, she reached down and grasped its tusk with both hands. Black corruption spread across its flesh as the beast tore itself free from her leg. The combination of fire and corruptive ichor finally brought it crashing down.

She whipped around just as the bear-shaman swung back around with a vicious paw, mauling her across the shoulder. She gritted her teeth, turning and burying it under sustained blasts of emerald fire. Finally, it collapsed in a smoking heap at her feet.

The crackle of lightning and boom of stone told her she had taken too long in dispatching the two elders. A quick glance at Kael confirmed her fears—three massive avalanche elementals were coalescing around him, lightning eyes turning toward her, vine and stone limbs grasping, ready to crush. Storm clouds gathered overhead, charged by the raw energies of the hulking elementals. Hastily, she reawakened the two shamans before her, their forms barely serviceable after the spells she had just wrought against them.

She looked up at Kael, fists ready with emerald fire, and hesitated. Kael looked back at her, but rather than the fury or resolve she expected to see, his gaze looked pensive and sad. The air crackled with the static charge from the elementals, but Kael did not send them to attack.

“You should have died, Meren.”

“You should have killed me, Kael,” She snarled. “Like you wanted.”

“You’re right. I should have. So you would not have become this.”

She laughed, hollow, empty of any mirth. “You told me I would be a wielder of blood and bone. Now I am that and so much more.”

Kael shook his head. “Not like this. You are no channeler of life. You are merely death’s tool, its puppet.”

“You’re wrong. Death bends to me.”

Kael sighed. At one time, it might have sounded paternal to her. Now it just rang of patronizing condescension.

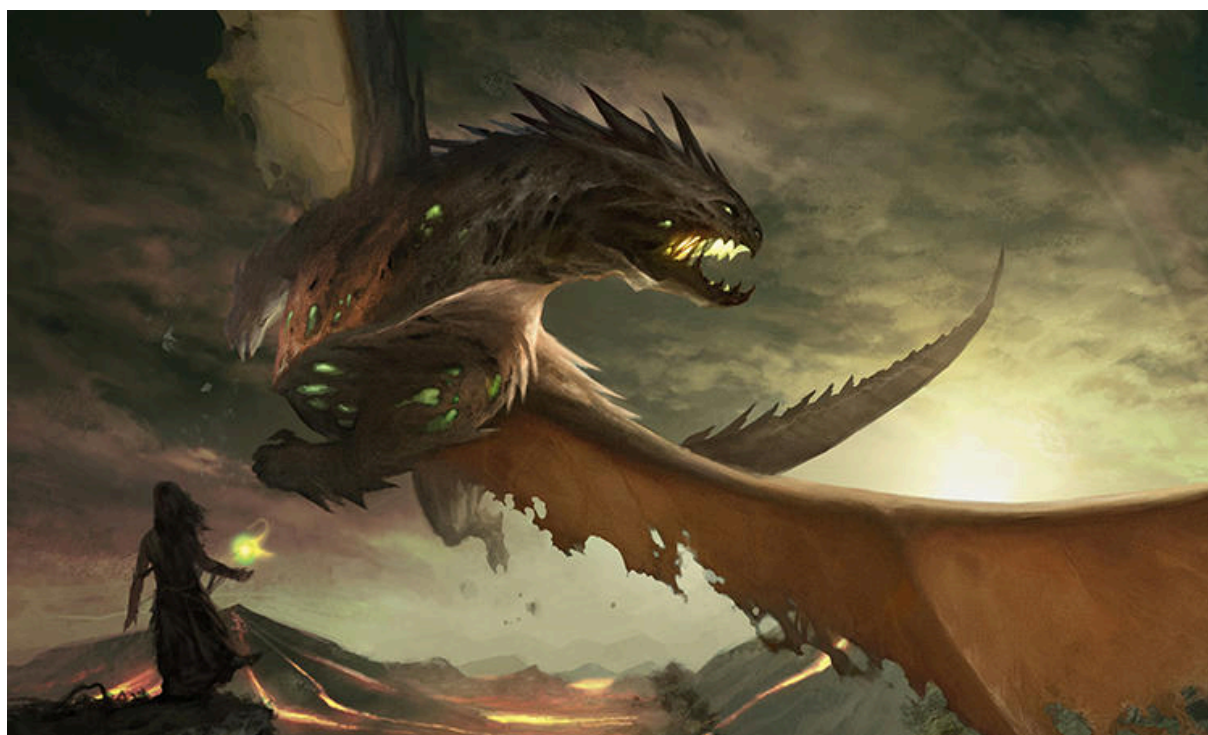
“If you insist. Return to the earth, Meren Deathbender.”

Kael pointed, and the three massive elementals charged at her, bellowing roars filling the air and trembling steps sending shockwaves through the earth.

She smiled, looking at the two mostly destroyed corpses standing at her defense. The smile grew into a laugh, manic and shrill, as the elementals barreled ever closer.

With a sudden gesture, she tore the sparks of life from the two Borrowed. She thrust her hands in the air, sending the sparks skyward.

“Strike, *Skaal Kesh*. “



Art by Mark Winters

She felt rather than saw her perfect weapon descend from the sky. A massive shadowy form struck with impossible speed, leaving in its wake a trail of clouds, blasting out a rush of wind from where it landed. The three elementals fell apart mid-charge, their anchors to this plane broken as her instrument of vengeance struck Kael. She ducked as giant boulders came hurtling and bouncing past her, dodging out of the way as they kicked up shards of stone and clouds of dust.

As the rocks settled, she looked back to where Kael had stood. An enormous, shadowy dragon crouched in his place, holding the broken form of Kael impaled on its claws. Its eyes glowed green, and clouds of vile smoke billowed from its maw. Its muscles rippled as it shifted its weight, and its long tail swept across the stone, sending little flinty sparks into the air. *Skaal Kesh*. Scourgeclaw.

To her surprise, she found that Kael was still conscious, despite the dragon talons piercing his abdomen and holding him aloft. He looked down at her as she approached.

"You tamed . . . a dragon . . . impossible," he mumbled.

"I *reforged* a dragon," she corrected.

A wheezing sound escaped from Kael. She guessed it was supposed to be a laugh.

"I was right after all. You *are* strong, Meren."

She stared at him, her face a stony mask.

"Devour, *Skaal Kesh*."

The gruesome crunch of teeth against flesh and bone echoed across the steppes. Blood poured down in great bursts as she watched the dragon consume the last remnants of her past in two great bites. Vengeance served.

But she wasn't satisfied.

She turned, gazing at the horizon, the untamed vistas of Jund. Faintly, she could hear the wild pulse of the land, a pulse she once sought to tame. Now, she wanted to destroy it.

Her vengeance would continue. She would silence the pounding rhythm of this land. She would show it the beautiful darkness, the serenity of death.

She was Meren, last of Clan Nel Toth.

And she would not stop until all of the cairns of Jund were toppled.

