

Ikoria: Survival of the Fittest

Roy Graham

From set *March of the Machine*
20. 04. 2023

It had been a hard day. Their column—such a formal name for a line of filthy, exhausted men, women, and children—snaked out between the spires of jagged rock breaking up the horizon line, monoliths shaped by the fires and quakes that regularly scoured the surface of Raugrin until only the most resilient creatures survived.

But they do survive, thought Jirina Kudro, walking alongside one of the wagons heaped high with relics from their life in Drannith. From before the invaders came. *Just as we will. As we must.*

Her own mount had gone down miles back, mouth frothing with red foam, and she had refused to take another. The crushed volcanic glass lining the path was no kinder to leather boots than it had been to hooves, but still, she would walk. She had asked that much of her people, the people of Drannith; if they could cross this blasted hellscape on foot, so would she. Jal Korcha, they called this. The terror road.

It was a hard place, and it had been a hard day, but somewhere up ahead waited the thick walls and bristling spears of Lavabrink, and another chance for them. Another chance at holding the gates. At surviving.

Farther up the line, she spotted Colonel Bryd riding toward her at a trot, grimacing and muttering with each bounce of the saddle.

“News?” said Jirina, dispensing with the typical formalities. She didn’t have the energy.

“General Kudro,” said Bryd, snapping out a smart salute that nevertheless seemed somehow petulant. “According to the reports of our outriders, Lavabrink is still half a day’s march. We will be there by nightfall.”

Half a day’s march. It seemed so easy, when one said it like that. If she could just keep her people together another handful of hours, they would be safe. Or at least, they would have another chance at safety.

“General,” said Bryd. “If you’ll permit me to speak my mind more frankly than my rank might—”

“Just say it, Bryd. I can walk for a few hours more, but you’re going to bring me to the limit of my endurance if you keep that up.”

He bristled. “Very well. There are many wounded in our column, and many sick. Both are slowing us down. Perhaps it would be wise to send a detachment of soldiers ahead, to prepare Lavabrink for our arrival.”

“We need all the fighters we can muster here,” said Jirina. “Those wounded and sick you mention won’t be able to fend off an attack on their own.”

Bryd’s horse shuffled a bit in place. “I beg your pardon, General, but if that *thing* catches up to us, there will be no fight. Only slaughter.”

Her feet ached. Her shoulders burned under the weight of her armor. “Then we’d better hope Vivien and her new friends are successful in their hunt.”

“How can you trust her?” Bryd hissed. “She knows nothing of our people, nothing of what we have sacrificed —”

“Enough!” spat Jirina, her patience at an end. “We have few enough allies as it is. I won’t have you discarding one of our strongest on baseless paranoia!”

Bryd’s lip curled. After a long moment, he turned and seized the reins—but before he could ride off, a scream rose from somewhere behind them. Panic began to roll down the caravan in waves as another sound followed: an awful, reverberating howl, like sheet metal and beast all at once. Jirina ripped the sword from her sheath.

“Coppercoats!” she called. “To arms!”

To war. To slaughter. To endless, endless death.

Vivien pressed her ear to the ground and closed her eyes, smelling sulfur, soil, the iron tang of the volcanic earth.

There: impact, somewhere close. And then, a long breath later, again: *Thoom. Thoom.* Like thunder creeping over the plains.

She straightened and wiped her cheek.

Behind her, men and women stood from what little cover the scrub grass offered on their little hilltop. Goggles, masks, and hoods rendered them featureless. Most carried long spears tipped with a wicked barbed head. Some had bows slung around their shoulders, and little bottles of every imaginable poison dangling from bandoliers. When the time came, every arrow would be doused in three separate agents before embarking on its lethal flight. They were killers to a one, people who made their living going into the wild and culling anything that might be considered a threat to humanity. Not hunters so much as exterminators, and under normal circumstances Vivien would have been their sworn enemy.

But now, they are just another arrow in my quiver.

“He’s close. Within a mile. Take your positions.”

Without a word, they fanned out in a careful crouch, barely making a sound save for the whisper of grass against dark clothing. Within a minute they were gone, leaving her alone with the man they called their leader.

Ikoria’s most accomplished monster hunter wasn’t a particularly tall man, but his shoulders were broad and packed densely with muscle. His hair was swept back behind a high forehead. That ridiculous mustache of his seemed to accentuate his ugly grin even more. “Listen to you. Giving orders like a high commander of Drannith. You know they only obey because I tell them to, yes?”

She ignored him, her eyes fixed on the mouth of the canyon ahead. From this distance she couldn’t tell the subtle differences in the color of the earth, where they’d buried their little surprises. That was good.

Somewhere to the east, Jirina and the other innocents of Drannith crawled slowly toward shelter. Lukka would be coming for them. No matter how little she liked this man, she and Chevill were the only thing standing between those people and their doom.

Thoom. There it was again.

Thoom.

Thoom.

“What’s wrong, beast-lover?” sneered Chevill. “Wingcat got your tongue? Or perhaps it’s terror which has seized your heart. Fear not, for the great Chevill is here, and if there is one thing I know how to do, it is kill monsters.”

She could barely hear him. All her attention was fixed on the canyon now, where a scattering of lizard-mice emerged, running in barely trackable zigs and zags, the erratic and mindless motions of prey fleeing predator.

Thoom.

Just behind the little creatures came a raptor, then another, and another after that, all running low to the ground, their tails held straight out behind them for balance, moving in sinuous, sure lines. One might have thought they were watching a hunt, if the raptors hadn’t closed the gap and utterly ignored the lizard-mice. They were trying only to get away from the canyon. From somewhere behind them came a deep, throaty baying.

Thoom.

From the mouth of the canyon now came a vantasaur, thirty tons of stampeding animal, an unbelievable mass of muscle and will all bent toward escape. In the beast’s haste, though, it misjudged its footing; Vivien watched as one colossal leg slipped, misplacing thousands of pounds, unbalancing the careful architecture of the dinosaur’s gallop. Almost in slow motion, it fell—only for a moment. But a moment was long enough.

As the vantasaur struggled back to its feet, its body suddenly jerked backward. It bellowed again, crying out, before all thirty tons were dragged violently backward out of sight.

“What in the devil’s teeth?” hissed Chevill, even his bluster arrested.

The creature continued baying, the calls desperate and terrified, until—with a distant, wet crack—they abruptly stopped.

More sounds followed. Terrible, unplaceable—ripping, snapping, the sounds of eating and of things for which Vivien had no words.

“We’re supposed to be hunting the Coppercoat. The exile!” said Chevill, no longer daring to speak above a whisper.

Vivien only nodded toward the canyon. “We are.”

On Ikoria, they called just about anything a monster. Fear drove that label; a civilization raised to hate and despise the creatures with whom they shared their plane. The animals of Ikoria were mighty and dangerous, fierce and proud, but Vivien would not call them monsters. They were nothing like what stepped out from that canyon, shaking the earth with each thunderous footfall.

It had, in a broad sense, the shape of a man: two arms, though longer and thinner than what might belong to a human being; two legs, made thicker to support the great weight of its vast, carcass-like body. At its center protruded—not a man, anymore, not quite, but Lukka.

She still remembered the last time they’d spoken—it was Vivien who had convinced him to go to New Phyrexia with the strike team. He had wanted more than anything to return home a hero, rather than a traitor, but he’d only gotten half of that wish granted. Lukka hung from a web of flesh at the center of the titan, nestled into its torso like an exposed heart. The upper half of his body Vivien almost recog-

nized, though it was mangled by plugs and sockets and bonded now with copper turned a sickly green with verdigris. Below the waist, though, he had been attached to some creature of iridescent metal, forming him into a gruesome centaur.

Its endless rippling mass was a hundred colors; countless permutations crossed its skin, razored spines and hardened scales to bristling fur to great washes of naked pink and brown flesh. At the elephantine slab that made up the abomination's left leg, she saw the unmoving, glassy-eyed face of the vantasaur. Vivien watched in mute horror as it sank backward, slipping into the flesh like a ship beneath the waves. *He already took Drannith*. The reminder came to her and doubled back its meaning with fresh horror. *This* was his eludha now, his bonding, through the twisted lens of Phyrexia.

As it stepped into the valley, the first of the mines went off below the thing. The lizard-mice and raptors had been too light; the explosives, planted an hour earlier, buried too deep. The vantasaur might have done it, thought Vivien, but the vantasaur—well.

The Lukka-thing made no sound of distress; it had no mouth with which to scream. It sagged forward, though, stretching out an arm to catch itself. It hit another mine. A cascade of explosions ripped forward, sending plumes of black earth into the air.

It reared back now, away from the blasts, and a thunderous crack peeled out through the floodplain it stood on. The abomination took a step forward—and that titanic, fleshy leg plunged down, past the hardened crust, into the beating volcanic heart of Raugrin.

Even from here, Vivien could feel the wash of heat over her face as magma bubbled up around the Lukka-thing's leg. Flames erupted further up the trunk and smoke began to billow out over the valley floor. The smell was horrible beyond description. She was entranced by the sight, the horror and the scale of it, like a glimpse into the primordial birth of the plane. She almost missed Chevill rising next to her, cupping his hands to shout “Now! We have him!”

From the bunches of red sawgrass around the opening of the canyon rose Chevill's black-clad hunters. They loosed a stinging cloud of arrows, peppering the Lukka-thing's flank, the shafts closest to the lava bursting into little multicolored flames as the poisons burned. On either side of the monstrosity, others hurled barbed spears affixed to ropes, planting two dozen in the meat of Lukka's terrible cuirass. The hunters pulled each line taught and then, with practiced movement, unslung long hammers to pound stakes into the ground as anchors.

“Take the shot!” barked Chevill.

Vivien was already pulling back the arkbow's string. Her elbow went up, the powerful muscles in her back and shoulder tensing in practiced motion, an arrow of translucent green light forming between her index and middle fingers. It was a long shot, but she had made longer.

Vivien loosed. The arrow soared ahead, pure magic, free from the touch of gravity. It crossed the space between her and the Lukka-thing in an instant. Just before it landed in the actual body of Lukka, the Phyrexian implanted at the center of this awful flesh construct, a spur of bone jutted up suddenly from the flesh around him, catching the shot harmlessly.

Chevill barked a swear. Vivien readied another shot, but already the thing was slouching forward, hiding its pilot-heart. Slowly, then, like a beast rising from sleep, it pushed forward. The dozens of ropes in the thing's side strained, then began to give. Some snapped; for others, the spears tore messily from the mottled flesh. Vivien could hear panicked shouts from the hunters on the ground. Some were already turning to run. Others readied second barbs, hefting them for another toss. These ones paid for their bravery; with a sweep of one misshapen arm, the giant cleared them from the scrubland. The ones who

were not tossed away like dolls were embedded, Vivien could see, in the thing's arm. They screamed and waved helplessly as they sank deeper and deeper into the flesh before finally disappearing.



Art by: Anastasia Balakchina

"Stand! Stand and fight, you bastards!" Chevill was bellowing, but it was no use. The hunters, if they could even hear him, were mad with fear now, running with no semblance of organization, no thought but to put distance between themselves and the monster at their backs. One tripped and sprawled forward—apparently hard enough to trigger one of their buried explosives. He vanished in a sudden plume of black smoke.

Vivien's shoulder ached; still, she held the string taut, waiting for an opening. None came. Without straightening from its hunch, the Lukka-thing began to tear its way free from the lava pit where it still burned. If it freed itself, they would never get another chance.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, opening her mind to the spirits within the arkbow. They snapped and bellowed and roared within the weapon, as though they were as desperate as she was to destroy the abomination. She loosed, the string snapping forward, the spectral arrow flying toward its mark. This time, the viridian energy unspooled, growing as it soared toward the Lukka-thing, changing and multiplying in size.

A translucent and powerfully muscled leg touched the earth mid-run, losing none of the arrow's momentum; a ghostly green jaw materialized, already open in a challenging roar. The spectral dreadjaw, every bit the predator in death that it has been in life, crashed into the Lukka-thing with tremendous force.

For a moment, the abomination seemed outmatched. It was bigger than the dreadjaw, but clumsy, only meat with none of the killing instincts. The half-solid beast snarled and bit and thrashed, tearing out great hunks of dead flesh. Meanwhile the Lukka-thing grasped and pulled and embraced the spirit—trying, maybe, to absorb it like it had the vantasaurs—but to no effect. Still the lava boiled beneath it, sending out black clouds heavy with the stink of burning corpses. For a moment, it looked like they had a chance.

Then the Lukka-thing swung its arm in a way no animal should have been able to. It was a boneless strike, a curling whip-punch that the dreadmaw couldn't anticipate. The impact seemed to ripple through the spirit's form, stunning it for moment. It seemed to be reconstituting its spectral body when the thing crashed both arms down on the ghostly dinosaur in a brutish, ugly blow, all its mountainous weight behind it. The dreadmaw simply dissolved, the emerald energy fading and mixing in with the carpet of greasy smoke.

Vivien watched, helpless, as the Lukka-thing pulled itself out of the volcanic fissure, its legs coated with steaming black stone where the lava was hardening. Finding its stride again, the abomination marched on as if nothing had ever been in its way.

"He's heading for the terror road." For Jirina, and the survivors of Drannith. "They won't have reached Lavabrink yet. We have to hurry," she said, already slinging the arkbow over one shoulder. But she turned to find Chevill watching her from the ridge, an unreadable expression on his face.

"Hurry where? To do what?"

"Delay him. Surprise him. Perhaps he's wounded." It was a faint hope, but that was the only kind available just then.

Chevill spat into the black earth. "My hunters are dead or scattered. We've lost, beast-lover."

"*You* are alive. Are you the great hunter Chevill, or was that all campfire bluster?"

He barked a short and mean laugh, but in that moment, Vivien saw what he had been trying so hard to conceal: fear.

"Aye, I am he. Do you know what separates a good hunter from a great one? Knowing what you can kill, and what you can't. And I'd say I've learned just which of those categories the Coppercoat now falls into. There's nothing more we can do, unless your wee magical bow has an even nastier monster still cooped up in there."

Vivien took a step closer to the man. She was taller than he was and loomed over him now. "I can't let you leave, Chevill. I need you. You know this land, and I don't."

"Which is why you should take my advice and run." He turned to look at the hulking form of the Lukka-thing, retreating now slowly out of their sight—or was he looking past it, toward where those thundering steps were taking the abomination?

As if hearing her thoughts, Chevill said, "There are things in those mountains that make death seem a kindness. If you must kill me, girl, then do it. At least people will lay flowers on my grave, instead of never knowing that the great hunter Chevill existed at all."

Quick and sharp, Vivien slipped the bow from her shoulder and pulled back the string, a ghostly green arrow appearing nocked. She held it, pointed toward Chevill, who sniffed and looked back toward the mouth of the canyon. She held it there a moment longer, green light playing across his face, before twisting her body and shooting it straight into the sky.

The creature slaughtering Jirina's Coppercoats might have once been one of the great cats of the Savai plains; the metallic plating that now covered its face, coppery and stained with green oxide and red blood, made it hard to be certain. Under a paw the size of a human head, it held a soldier pinned against the ground, who struggled weakly against the claws pushing into his chest. Without thought—because if she allowed herself to think, to fear, she might run—Jirina surged forward, swatting at the

beast's face with her sword. It clanged off the plating, sending an awful shock through her arm, but the creature reared backward off the soldier and lunged for her instead.

She shuffled backward, those countless hours in the practice yard all that kept her from tripping over her own feet in a panic. Bryd rode up on her left; at a snarl from the Phyrexian, his mount reared back and dumped him on the ground. Jirina saw the bands of raw, naked muscle in the creature's neck tense with predatory instinct, uncannily like so many of Ikoria's beasts. In that momentary distraction, she thrust her sword into those cables of flesh, then wrenched her arm downward, almost severing the head entirely. Still the beast thrashed and spasmed violently on the ground as Coppercoats armed with warhammers ran up to beat the creature into scrap.

Jirina wiped the blood and oil carefully from the edge of her blade, willing the tremors in her hands to cease. She only dimly registered the sound of movement behind her before the second Phyrexian cat hit her, raking her armor with its claws and tearing the back of her breastplate open like a tin can.

The force alone knocked Jirina prone, her sword clattering over the stones and out of reach. She rolled over just in time for the front of her breastplate to catch a second claw; metal crumpled and bent. She felt the points press into her chest as the monster snarled down at her. A ribbon of hot drool landed on her cheek and began to sizzle and burn excruciatingly. No words came to her in what she was sure were her final moments; she only opened her mouth to snarl back.

Suddenly the pressure on her chest lifted. Jirina could breathe again. Above her, the snarling beast began to howl, a horrible sound of grinding and bending steel, as it was pulled off her. The writhing monster was lifted into the air and underneath it she saw her savior: a tigorrilla, huge even for the species, hoisting the Phyrexian like a trophy already claimed. With an incredible display of strength, the tigorrilla slammed the Phyrexian into the ground. Jirina heard bones break—the thing still had bones, apparently. Still, it tried to rise, until a man with a rounded stone club hammered a dent into the creature's face and knocked it prone again. A strange, glowing hound leaped on top of it then, tearing at the cables running along its back, pulling loose whatever it could. More soldiers appeared, jamming spears into the cat, turning it into a pile of blood and parts and oil.

Oil, Jirina remembered dimly. Vivien had warned her about the oil. She could see black stains already on orange crystals jutting from the tigorrilla's shoulders. "Keep your distance," she barked, pushing herself up on one elbow. "Don't touch it!"

"Are you hurt, General Kudro?" said the man with the club, reaching down to her. One of the bonders, she remembered now. Haldan, she thought. He and his people had been watching the eastern flank.

"I'll be fine," she muttered, taking his hand and rising to her feet. "The tigorrilla—"

As she said it, though, the crystals began to glow with a soft light, and the Phyrexian oil bubbled and hissed, turning to a sickly black smoke. In moments it was as if the stain had never been there at all.

Haldan followed her gaze. "Yes. I don't understand it either, in truth. Those new crystals have grown onto many of them—some kind of natural defense."



Art by: Sam Burley

"I suppose we shouldn't be surprised," said Jirina. "The monsters of this plane have always been a step ahead of us."

A gasp went up in the crowd behind her, and Jirina whirled, hand going to her sword-belt—still empty. It wasn't another attack, though. In the sky to the west, a thin green light arced just below the clouds. Vivien, and that blowhard Chevill. Jirina held her breath, waiting, watching. *Good news. Give me good news for once, dammit. We're due some.*

A moment passed, agonizingly long—and then another green light arced into the sky. Jirina felt all the hope run out of her, bubbling away like the oil.

That was the signal. They had failed. Lukka was still coming.

"General! General Kudro, are you well?" Bryd ran up, casting a bloodied spear aside.

"Fine," she said, barely a whisper. Lukka was coming. He would find them before they reached Lavabrink. And then—

"General, the column is waiting. Should we advance?" said Bryd.

She hadn't wanted to make this choice. Of all the things in that moment, she thought of her father. He had been a cruel man by the end, a villain in so many ways. But perhaps in his position, there was no way to become anything else.

"These were scouts," she said. "We need to change course—there's a shortcut perhaps a mile ahead, a path leading eastward. It will be harder going for the wounded and elderly, but we are left with no options."

Bryd briskly saluted and ran off to find his mount. Jirina turned to find Haldan watching her uncertainly. "I grew up in Raugrin," he said quietly. "I've taken Jar Korcha many times. That path does not lead to Lavabrink."

He looked over his shoulder, toward the sky, as if he was suddenly worried he might be carried off, but there was nothing except those gaping red portals far to the north, almost out of sight. "We're in the territory of—"

Steady, General. Jirina faced him, willing her face into stillness. "If you want to make it to nightfall alive, you'll say nothing."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's the truth. That's all."

Jirina didn't wait for a reply. She retrieved her sword from where it lay on the ground some yards off, glancing at her reflection in the steel for only a moment before slamming it back into her sheath.

The pass Jirina led them through was narrow and jagged as the peaks that climbed on either side of them. Harder going to be sure; the sharp and uneven stones that littered the trail took off wagon wheels and punched through the soles of boots. Items once thought irreplaceable, taken from Drannith as it fell, now littered the ground where they passed. Silverware, clothing, furniture, family heirlooms that had survived countless calamities now left discarded like garbage. All the while, the refugees kept wary eyes to the outcroppings of volcanic rock on either side, waiting for the next attack.

All anyone spoke of now, when they spoke at all, was Lavabrink. Would there be enough beds? Would the sheets of lava billowing over the outer walls of the city be enough to deter the Phyrexians? How much further was it now? Not far now, someone always assured them.

The sun was low, turned a bloody orange by the gaseous haze shrouding Raugrin, when the column emerged from the narrow mountain pass into a basin of smooth black glass. Boots and walking sticks clicked almost melodically; the reflected light against its surface seemed to show a mirror world, all of them made into dark, featureless silhouettes. Close to the center of the basin were odd oval-like shapes, seemingly made of the same volcanic glass. It was strange terrain, but at first the refugees were simply relieved for an end to the closeness of the pass. Only when they searched the horizon did an uneasiness begin to set in. On all sides of the basin were smooth, steep slopes; there seemed to be no other road or pass out.

Where has the general brought us?

This isn't Lavabrink.

We have to turn back!

Jirina felt the crowd simmering, a herd close now to panic. She knew it was her responsibility to say something, but in that moment no words came to her.

Someone grabbed her arm. It was the bonder from before—Haldan. "We have to leave this place. These people can't be here. None of us can. This is—"

He was interrupted by a scream. Everyone, now, was pointing at the far slope, where something much like a human hand—though far out of scale, unnatural and huge—grabbed the lip of the volcanic basin. The fearful murmuring all around Jirina went suddenly, terribly quiet.

In pendulous, clumsy motions, the monster of stolen flesh pulled itself over the rocks. Lukka was more grand and horrible than when Jirina had seen him in Drannith, his suit of flesh easily three times the size. Scales and feathers spotted the vast canvas of its skin, and the trunk-like legs were covered in hunks of fused black stone and glistening, ghastly burns.

It began to crawl down the slope, spider-like, bending its impossible anatomy like clay, and this broke the silence. Suddenly the air around Jirina surged with panic—screaming, crying, and angry calls filled the air. The crowd had begun to press back toward the narrow pass out, but there were too many of them, the escape route too small. *They're going to trample each other*, thought Jirina. She tried to shout over the maddening cacophony, commanding them to hold their ground. No one listened; it wasn't clear anyone had even heard her.

The thing had reached the floor of the basin now. Slowly, it rose on its mangled, thick legs, and there, at the center of its chest, she could faintly make him out. Lukka. *My fiancé*.

Across the surface of the towering horror, flesh rippled and split, leaving pock marks—*no, not pock marks*, thought Jirina. *Mouths*.

“QUIET!”

A thousand voices shouted in unison, and the basin went quiet. The crowd behind her stilled, too afraid in that moment to even continue their crazed dash to safety.

“DRANNITH! TRAITOR-CITY! YOUR PRODIGAL SON HAS RETURNED FOR YOU.”

The voices matched, but weren't perfectly synched, making eerie echoes of each other as Lukka delivered his message.

“I FORGIVE YOUR CRIMES AGAINST ME. I BRING A GREAT GIFT. WITHIN PHYREXIA YOU WILL FIND STRENGTH UNLIKE ANYTHING YOU HAVE KNOWN. WITHIN ME, YOU WILL FIND TRUE UNITY AND PURPOSE.”

The Lukka-thing stepped forward, sending a tremor through the earth. Somewhere behind Jirina, a child began to cry.

Hand over hand, Vivien climbed. She was covered with a thousand nicks and bruises. The hardened glassy rock cut into her palms, turned her footing so she nearly stumbled and fell a dozen times. None of that mattered—she pushed on. Vivien was halfway up the slope when she heard the voices, all speaking together as one terrible choir. He had found them. She swallowed her endless aches and pains and kept climbing.

Finally, she pulled herself over the lip of the cliff the Lukka-thing had climbed. She saw him there, drawn up in all his awful grandeur—and on the other side, what was left of Drannith, and Jirina somewhere among them.

For an instant the basin darkened as something passed in front of the sun. A shape, moving swiftly through the sky, caught Vivien's eye. An eagle? No—the wing shape was all wrong for that, closer to the leathery curves of a dragon. That, and it was far too big.

A cry split the air, and in it Vivien heard pride, hunger, and pure territorial fury. Something swooped down through the clouds, and she saw him clearly now: Vadrok, the apex monster of Raugrin.

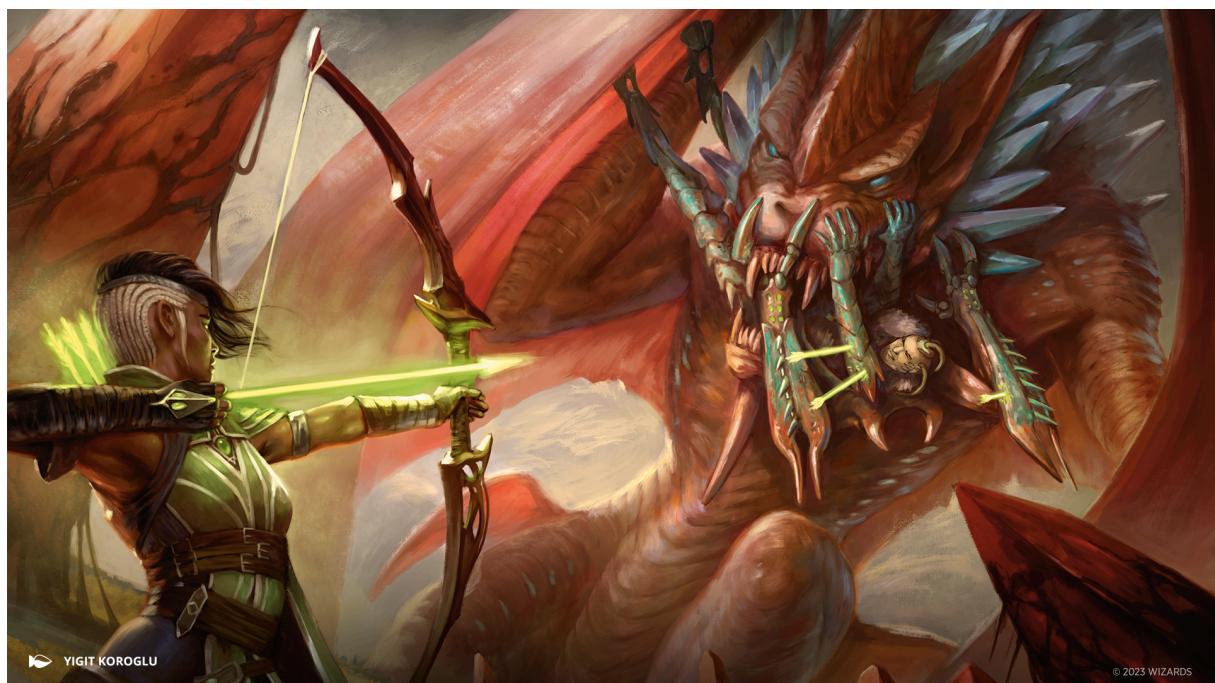
Oh my god, she realized. *We're in its nest*.

It dove toward the greatest threat laid out across the basin—the Phyrexian titan. Lukka reached out an arm, grasping toward the catlike dragon in response. At the last instant, Vadrok veered to one side, changing the momentum of all that muscle so that it only veered by. Where it passed, a deep gash was left across the Lukka-thing's arm from hand to shoulder, the flesh sagging open, unnamable fluids spilling out across the ground far below.

Vadrook wheeled back around, passing within yards of where Vivien crouched atop the rocks; a roar of wind swept after, almost knocking her back over the cliff. This time, the Lukka-thing raised both arms, holding them like a wrestler. Just before the apex monster reached it, those arms split down the middle; numberless tendrils of flesh grabbed at Vadrok. Those it ripped away with talon and teeth landed with heavy, sickening thuds against the smooth stone below. Some, though, found purchase; Vivien watched as Vadrok beat its wings helplessly, unable to lift its own bulk and the terrible mass of the Phyrexian attached to him. Possessing meat wrapped across Vadrok's leg, inching forward almost like a liquid; soon it covered the talons altogether.

Even it can't win , thought Vivien. Even a beast like that.

She unslung her bow with a shake of her arm and nocked an arrow, pulling it back. If she could only distract it, maybe she could give Vadrok the edge it needed. The monster was wrestling with the Phyrexian now, slowly being drawn inch by inch into it; she searched for a target, but Lukka himself was blocked by the thrashing predator.



Art by: Yigit Koroglu

Then, in the fading light, she noticed a strange blue glow rising from the apex monster's mouth.

Vadrook roared again—that vicious animal call—and flames so brightly blue they were almost white-washed over the Lukka-thing's arm. Anything the flames touched was consumed in an instant, not burned so much as erased. All the mouths still dotting the surface of the Lukka-thing began to scream. That, Vivien was sure, was a sound that would never leave her—a thousand voices all crying out in identical agony. Suddenly, it was as if most of the flesh titan's arm had never existed at all.

More coruscating blue flame poured from Vadrok's mouth, scouring the right flank of the nightmarish thing; it raised an arm to shield itself, but the flames greedily devoured anything they were given. The Phyrexian titan lurched to one side, releasing its hold on Vadrok in favor of retreat—but the Ikorian predator was faster. It snapped its head forward, pushing fearlessly now into the center of the abomination, and tore out a hunk of—no, not flesh, Vivien realized. Struggling now in Vadrok's jaws was *Lukka*. The true Lukka, or at least the thing New Phyrexia had made of him.

Without its pilot, the giant of harvested meat and bone teetered to one side and fell to the ground with enough force to echo through the nearby peaks. Vadrok beat its great wings twice and lifted himself up onto the same cliff edge on which Vivien perched. She was no more than a hundred yards from the beast—from the squirming, screaming thing in his mouth.

In Drannith , thought Vivien, they would have at least given him last words.

She pulled back one more spectral arrow and put it in the center of his chest. Then another, and another. Drannith was gone. They were in the wilds now, and they kept only one law: survival.

Shoulder to shoulder with the other survivors, Jirina watched as Vadrok tossed Lukka's corpse down the slope. *So passes the captain of the Specials ,* she thought, and felt nothing but an odd hollowness where she might have found sadness or regret. The great beast of Raugrin lifted off the ridge and landed down next to the sagging mass of flesh remaining, scouring it with one more gout of flames. *So hot they can burn away the very memory of something ,* Jirina remembered Lukka once telling her. In this instance she hoped that was true.

Vadrok turned to the assembled crowd—all that remained of Drannith. They had briefly forgotten their terror watching the monsters battle. Now, staring into Vadrok's yellow eyes, they found it once more. Whispers, gasps, and whimpers spread around Jirina, though no one fled just yet. They seemed, as a people, to hold their breath.

Again, that blue glow rose in the back of the creature's throat.

Then, waving her arms, running in front of them all, was Vivien. "Wait," she said, breathless. Speaking, Jirina realized, to the apex monster himself. "Wait!"

Vadrok's gaze passed over her. Flicked, Jirina thought, to the bow still held in one hand. Then it was aloft again, the wind from those great wings rustling their clothes as it soared away.

Jirina almost fell to her knees. They would live. At least for a little while longer, they would all live.

"You used us as bait," someone said. Haldan, she found, turning to face him. "You knew we would be trapped here. The injured. The children."

"Yes," said Jirina. "I did."

"We could have been devoured by that thing. Or worse," he said, raising his voice. "We might have perished in the same fires!" His fury had reached his cheeks now, flushing them red.

"But you weren't."

"You had no idea what that monster would do!"

"In war, there are no certainties," said Jirina, feeling so very tired now. *Is it not enough to have won? To have gotten them to safety?* "We have to adapt if we want to survive. Just as the monsters do."

"You should have told us!" Someone in the crowd said.

"What kind of leader puts her people in front of a monster like that?" said another.

It was the only way , she thought. Couldn't they see that? It was the only way.

Wasn't it?

"Listen to me!" It was Vivien, speaking now. "Lavabrink is still a half-day's march. You'll have to walk through the first part of the night. Whatever else she did, Jirina bought you that time."

“With respect for what you’ve done,” said Haldan. “You aren’t one of us. And all the danger you walked into today, you did of your own free will. I am not a soldier, dammit!”

“I’m not one of you,” said Vivien. Only now could Jirina see how battered and bruised the woman looked. It didn’t seem to do much as slow her down. “And I can’t claim the right to tell you how to treat her. It’s your plane, your people. You can dethrone her or cast her out. But do that *after* you’ve survived what’s coming.”

Haldan looked at the hideous remains of Lukka’s creation, still smoldering with blue flames. “What’s *coming*?”

Just then, a ripple of thunder rolled across the sky. Behind the mountains: another hole in the sky. It was just like the ones that had opened over Drannith. From it—prodding almost, like a skeletal finger—came a white, metal tendril of impossible size. A branch, Vivien had called them, though Jirina couldn’t imagine the tree they belonged to.

“This is far from over,” said Vivien. “There’s a hard day ahead yet.”

For a moment, she didn’t know which way the crowd would break. But they had no energy to tear her apart just then. Around Jirina, people began to pick up their things, turn around their pack animals and wagons, helping one another as they went. She watched them ready each other for whatever was ahead. This is what they had earned, with their fighting today: survival. Another day, another hour, another minute.

There would be a reckoning, Jirina knew. A price to pay. Jirina lifted her own bag. When that day came, she would be more than glad to pay it.