

Hunger

Brandon O'Brien

From set *Zendikar Rising*

Just on the edge of the Free City of Nimana, a man in dark gray robes walked through the pitch-black night toward the camps, drawing his collar close to guard against the breeze. He kept a keen eye on everyone as he made his way down the market street. The locals could tell he was an outsider without ever getting a glimpse of the face beneath the robes—he walked cautiously, as if he had heard all the worst rumors about the city. The eyes of a few thieves nearby widened as they took in his less noticeable details: the weight of the coin purses in his pockets, a clutched scroll within an inner pocket of his robes, that the very air with which he walked seemed to give away that he was in the service of someone who paid him well—someone he was also terribly afraid of.

Near the end of the market were the tents where local mercenary adventurers did their business. There, the rebuilding was at its slowest, entire homes still shattered, although at least the rubble had been cleared, making room for more of the city's accustomed trade. The robed man saw merfolk shouting at butchers over the price of the meats they had cut from monster carcasses and hucksters spinning tall tales about trinkets they struggled to sell. Beyond them were the expeditionaries themselves, trading stories and checking their tools in the shared dim light of torches and the moon, waiting for someone to come to them with work.

He knew who he was looking for. His employer had sent him in search of a swordsman who frequented the market for drink. This man was part of one of the most brutal and efficient parties in Guul Draz, an unnamed band of travelers who cared little for the thrill of adventure or of discovery; they cared only for coin. This pleased him and his employer both—they didn't want someone who would gallivant or make a show of the thing. They just wanted the path cleared.

He found the man soon enough, leaning on a corner wall beside a pair of elderly tanners selling exotic beast hides, polishing the edge of a small blade on his linen shirt. The swordsman glanced up to meet the robed man's eyes staring at him. "You need something, friend?"

"Are you Tarsa, by chance?"

The man sighed as he nodded. "Follow me, then."



Anowon, the Ruin Thief | Art by: Magali Villeneuve

Neither had noticed the vampire behind them, stalking the emissary the entire way into the market. He had drawn the hood of his long blood-red cloak over his head to hide his pallor. This vampire had learned well lately how to conceal himself, to draw no attention. He was a hated man in most places, a murderer and thief with more infamy than renown, a target of foul words from some and far fouler beatings from the rest. The expeditionary parties that would let him travel alongside them did so hesitantly, knives within reach as they slept.

He suspected that following this envoy would be the first step to ending that. Indeed, Anowon thought this man would be his path to redemption.

When Tarsa got to the tents, he gestured to two adventurers, who straightened up to greet the pair like professionals. A slender kor with silver hair offered him a brass cup with something clear and strong smelling in it. “Where do you plan to send the best expeditionary crew Nimana has to offer, sir?”

The blue-robed man rejected the drink with a wave of his hand. “No need for pleasantries. I am no one of note—simply the traveling voice of a benefactor eager to employ you.”

Anowon stayed back, eavesdropping intently from a nearby alley. He had hoped to find the emissary alone, to make his case for an expedition and then find his own crew later, but now it couldn’t be helped. Maybe this party would be enough. Grand stories of Tarsa’s team were well-told in Nimana, about their unflappable demeanor and keen travel sense. He had also heard something that the emissary surely didn’t know yet

“It would appear that a member of your team isn’t here?” the man said, lowering his hood to scratch his jet-black hair, glancing around the tents. “I was told you had a complement of four, but—”

Tarsa interjected quickly, brow furrowed with frustration. "We lost one of our own in a trip to Ondu." He glanced at the kor, whose fists had clenched as soon as they heard the question, releasing as their eyes met. "But you need not worry about our work on account of it, sir."

Ondu . Anowon's ears perked up at the mention. Even if he didn't get the job, perhaps meeting this particular party was still a small serendipity.

"That's a shame, I imagine," the emissary said, "by which I mean, it's ironic that I've come to offer a job in Ondu—a job my employer knows is tremendously dangerous."

Serendipity indeed , Anowon whispered to himself.

The kor tensed again. "How dangerous do you mean?"

The emissary tilted his head toward the kor. "Nadino, correct?" He didn't even wait for them to respond to their name as he continued. "Have you gotten a chance to see the Skyclave in Jwar Isle yet?"

Nadino gasped, and Tarsa instinctively turned to them with comfort in his eyes. "We have," he replied softly.

"Oh " A beat of silence passed before the emissary continued. "Perhaps this is not—"

"No." Nadino spoke through gritted teeth. "Just an occupational hazard. We'll hear you out."

Tarsa grimaced. "I, for one, want a rematch with that damn thing."

"Grakmaw, they call it," the emissary added. "That is, in fact, your quarry. It's been troubling the vertical travel routes in the area, which isn't good for the business of expeditions. My client will pay whatever price you name, if you win your second round."

Nadino chuckled. "Sure. Beheading it will be a bonus."

"Bonus?" The emissary grinned. "My client is willing to offer payment *per head* ."

"And this client?"

"None of your concern. You need only know the payment is good." He reached for a royal blue velvet bag and tossed it before him. Tarsa instinctively catching it on its way back down. It felt like easily a hundred and fifty pieces. "For expenses. Of course, you also get to keep what you find, but remember that we're paying for pest control, not browsing."

Anowon reached into a pocket of his cloak for one of his papers as they spoke. That Skyclave had something to offer him, too, if he could simply make his case—

His notes fell shuffled onto the street as an elven man held him from behind, the crook of his elbow wrapped around Anowon's neck. "Boss!" the elf called out to Tarsa. "Looks like we got ourselves a spy!"

"Release me, you—!" All the words that came to Anowon to finish that sentence were bitter. He was trying his hardest not to be bitter. He knew he would be in for a lot of this. It was why he was staying hidden at all, which, in hindsight, was a terrible idea for this very reason. It was also why he wouldn't fight back, no matter how easy it would be to overpower them all. He didn't want to add to the hostility, especially since his face was still hidden—

"Show your face, shadow!" the emissary shouted, with the false bravery of someone who had never gotten in a fight or given an order before.

The elf lifted Anowon's hood. The very sight of his pale and painted face was enough for Tarsa to draw his blade.

"No!" Anowon gurgled, putting out his hands in submission. "I mean no harm! Let me—" he pointed down at his papers.

Nadino knelt to pick up the sheet nearest to them, squinting at it before passing it to Tarsa. "Notes on the Skyclaves it seems like everyone's favorite sage is eager to see the inside of one."

Tarsa gestured to the elf to let go, and Anowon fell to the floor and gathered his papers. "I reckon you followed this man here to steal our job?"

The vampire shook his head. "I want to see it."

Nadino crossed their arms. "That isn't our business."

Anowon paused to take in everyone's tense and angered looks then rose to meet Tarsa's gaze. "Whatever you think of me, all I ask is to study the thing. You can do with another member in any case. Allow me to fill that void." He turned to Tarsa. "I offer to serve your party for a fraction of your earnings."

"And what would be in it for you?" Tarsa asked.

He paused, searching for the word before he replied. "Knowledge."

Tarsa's crew hated the arrangement, but it satisfied the emissary, so they settled. Anowon would earn barely five percent of the purse but would be entitled to any papers he found. Relics were another matter; the vampire agreed to let Tarsa arbitrate, insisting he had no interest in gold or weapons. When asked what he expected to find beyond those prizes, he replied, "Far more valuable things."

For that arrogant tone, Tarsa's elven cleric Eret ransacked the sage's packs whenever the party slept, searching for any sign of a darker motive.

The emissary's client had already commissioned sea travel from Nimana to Jwar, manned only by one deckhand responsible for returning the ship. The tension of being trapped across the water with a vampire got to the three of them almost immediately. Nadino had no problem expressing their frustration to Anowon's face, threatening him with every other breath if he stepped too close or spoke out of turn. Eret was quieter, more wary, never daring to sleep when he could keep an eye open for a blade or a bite. Tarsa preferred delegating anything challenging, jokingly praising his vampire's strength and resilience as better for manning the sails alone as they traversed the eager winds of the Serpent's Maw, the ropes so taut across his arms that he briefly worried the storms would pop them off.

Anowon bore it all with cool stoicism. His most frustrated word came when Nadino threatened for the third time to feed parts of him to their gnarled companion Jolly if he crossed the line. "I assure you, I mean no harm. After we slay Grakmaw, we will never cross paths again."

They came to Jwar Isle's shores mere hours before dusk. Anowon winced. The dark was always the worst time to climb, but Tarsa had already insisted they would end the evening as near to the Skyclave as possible. He was the first out of the small vessel to collect their equipment pouches, almost solemnly bearing their weight as the other three adventurers and their horned pet disembarked.

Behind him, he could hear a dark, gravelly voice grumble in a tongue unknown to him. It sounded like a threat, like a reading of his soul, promising a suffering to come. He turned to find it and met two stone faces jutting out of the sand and grass to face them, their wide-open jaws revealing the palest blue glow that seemed to flicker slowly, like firefly light.

Anowon stood, transfixed. The longer he listened, the more he could swear he could make out some meaning, nearly gaining clarity only to have it fade away into noise the next moment. It ached twice;

once with a throbbing in his mind, and another with the longing to understand. He turned toward the others. "Do you hear that—"

Eret slapped him hard on the back of his neck, awakening him from his trance. "Look at this poor man's face. Don't tell me our brave ruin sage is afraid of the faduun!"

Anowon turned, poised to pounce on the elf. Their gazes met, and Eret's other hand immediately reached for a blade at his side. Briefly, Anowon's thoughts traveled to the image of this elf turning pale as he drank the last of his life, the sound of him wailing for help until his voice faded to nothing—

"Is there a problem?" Tarsa said. From the edge of Anowon's sight, he could see the warrior's hand reaching for his blade.

"Not at all," Anowon replied.

Night had fully fallen by the time they arrived at the safest upward route to the Skyclave. Tarsa sent Anowon ahead, while the rest of the team retrieved their packs and worked their way vertically through the stone cliffs. Relying on his superior vision to guide him through the dark, he secured the ropes, aided only by the faint blue glow of the Strand further off to the island's center. The other three followed behind warily. Eret made to ask his captain a question, and with an icy glare, Tarsa quashed it.

The weight of the three bodies tethered to him, combined with the gravity dragging him downward, felt like a test. Be patient, he thought. When this was all over, all his former follies would be behind him. If he were right about the Skyclaves, he would have the power and knowledge he had sought for so long. And if he behaved with that power, remained humble as he had been during his simple days scouring the texts at Sea Gate, he may just be able to hang onto it.

Nadino's gnarlid had already found its own way up the cliff and, as the trio of adventurers finally emerged one by one from the wall, met each with wet licks to their cheeks. The kor pointed up and northeast, not even lifting their head from their pet's affection. "The raised rocks from this cliff are nearest together and already cabled. We'll enter from there. At this point there isn't much light, so either we're doing this quickly or we're doing this at dawn."

Anowon barely listened. He had already leapt from the edge to the nearest platform, pausing as he landed to counterbalance the weight of his pack. "Make camp if you wish," he said. "I want to see it."

"What is wrong with you, sage?" Nadino shouted. "Did you forget that our job is to clear a hydra out of those ruins?"

"I promise to be careful—"

"—or you may die!"

"Then I promise to die carefully!" He bit his tongue and took a deep, hissing breath. "I apologize. I don't plan to disturb anything. My research—"

Tarsa met the frustrated gazes of the other two and muttered a curse to himself as he directed them to follow. In a nervous attempt to bring levity, Anowon continued. "It's fortuitous to meet these ropes here. Not many adventurers would leave a path behind for their fellows."

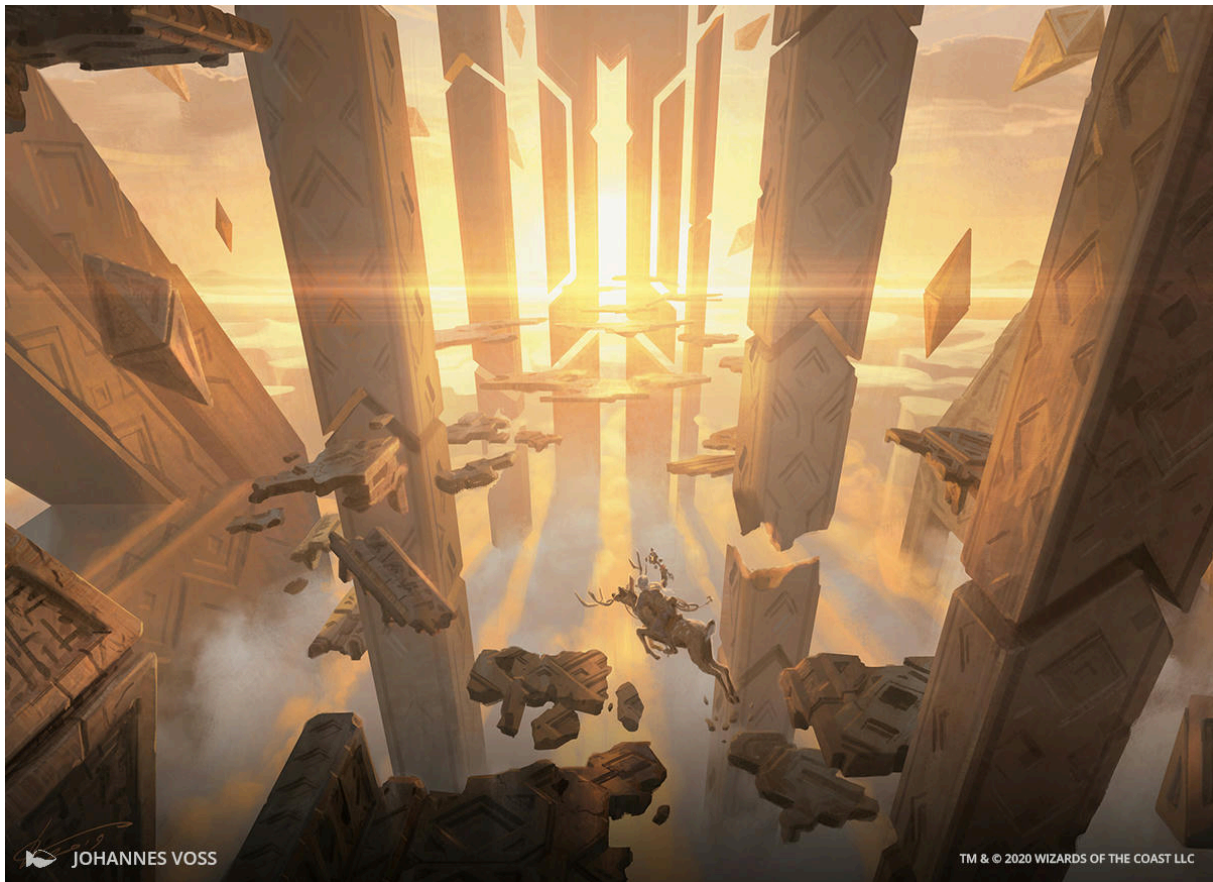
Nadino winced. "Orien left these."

"Orien?" Anowon paused. "Was that your—"

Tarsa cleared his throat loudly. "Forward, vampire."

He nodded and continued.

The sight that lay ahead had already entranced the selfish part of Anowon. Semicircular stone, still bearing the jagged red obsidian and pale striations of the earth it had fallen into, was now hovering before them, rich with stories older than the day Zendikar rumbled and broke to defend itself.



Skyclave Colonnade | Art by: Johannes Voss

Only the Skyclaves, he thought, could teach something as undeniable as themselves. So much of Zendikar's history was built on error, he thought. Even he had once named the civilization who shaped this land after the creatures who had warped and nearly destroyed it—the same creatures who tried to rob the vampires of House Ghet of their very minds and turn them against their kin. All that while, Anowon hid, studied the battle from the shadows, refused to get involved. But the risen Skyclaves corrected history, revealed a missing path within Zendikar's past. He could only hope that among the treasures they brought with them was a revelation about how this world gave birth to the clans—and their bloodchiefs—that the Eldrazi had sought to corrupt and control. Maybe answering that question would grant him some new status. At the very least, it could absolve him of his old cowardice.

As soon as he stopped at the gates of the Skyclave, he drew a notebook from his pack. It was falling apart, barely a stack of papers fluttering within its covers. But he held it like an ancient tome, turning pages eagerly to a series of interweaving lines and patterns.

Eret caught up to Anowon, observing the vampire surveying the walls of the Skyclave and leaning over to his notes to compare the two. Before the elf could ask, Anowon had already decided graciousness would earn back some goodwill.

"I've been studying the tessellations that adventurers have noted at the other locations and noticed a subtle distinction in their patterns. I suspect this is text." He pointed at it with the edge of his notebook. "I believe the ancient kor wrote on these walls, which makes it a useful source for discovering the purpose of this space."

"So that's why you're here?" Nadino scoffed, stooping by the gate to rest. "To study?"

"I was better as a student," he muttered. He thought it untrue right after. He had done so many bitter things in the pursuit of knowledge, making him little more than a plunderer. But before—when he was just willing to know, when he was at Sea Gate, when Tenihas of House Ghet took him in and taught him to value the histories—was better, before he lost those moments to his thirst for blood. Or worse, to his hunger for power.

"Barely that, by your own confession." Eret glanced with curiosity at the carvings on the Skyclave walls. "If there's anything we climbers know about ourselves, it's that the only thing worth knowing is the touch of a sturdy rope and the gleam of a good trinket. You sure you can trust us to"—he gestured at the walls—"translate *ancient kor*?"

"The adventurers didn't translate it. They merely wrote it down. Patterns, curves, depths focus. You can see that on your own." Anowon pointed deep into the Skyclave, where night had cast too deep a shadow to continue. "There are laboratories deeper within, along this leftward wall."

Tarsa carefully looped a length of rope around his arm as he moved closer toward the gate, gazing at the carvings. "So, these marks are directions?" he asked.

"Of a sort." Anowon traced the edge of a central line of the tessellating pattern on the wall, watching it weave within its neighbors until it turned sharply to its left and around an edge. "A credit to this language is that it isn't merely text. It's also a map."

Nadino sighed. "Too bad it can't help us find—"

A roar bellowed from the dark ahead of them. Tarsa merely snapped his fingers and his crewfolk took positions behind the carved walls. Nadino let a middling ball of fire fly just past Anowon's head, through the gateway, and down the corridor. In its light, he saw three pale yellow-green heads and three rows of teeth that resembled spiked traps.

Before Anowon could even think the thing's name, Eret had shoved him out of the way, toward an outer column. Tarsa whistled at Nadino, and the kor darted right, drawing the eyes of the rightmost head to them, slamming it with conjured bursts of flame and ice in turns. That was enough to spare them—its heads were now split by a single open column, its jaws snapping mere feet from them.

"You have a plan in mind, boss?" Eret asked.

Tarsa shook his head. "That thing can crack stone with its neck if motivated. And we're lightly sun-roasted motivation."

Anowon thought quickly. The emissary had told them later that the hydra had honed its sight in the bowels of the earth before the Skyclave rose, that it could sense heat as bright as dawn and track movement through the dimmest corridors. He shouted his sudden notion to Tarsa. "You all need to become colder!"

"Colder?" The captain caught on to the notion before calling to Nadino. "We're gonna need ice!" He gestured toward the corridor—past Grakmaw itself. "Give us some snow by that wall!"

Anowon caught his hand. "So close to the creature?"

"Yes." Tarsa tapped his temple. "Close as barnacles. We'll disappear right beneath it." He snapped again, and his crew's eyes focused on his next signal. He mouthed a count of three to himself before slicing the air with the blade of his hand, and they dashed for the inner wall.

Anowon slid, his momentum generated from the tilt of the risen floor. At the edge of his vision, Nadino spun their hooked staff overhead as they ran, and he could see pillows of slush ice gather slowly above

the corridor. Just before the adventurers collided with the wall, the beast clawed at the stone above them, catching Anowon across the forehead and pushing down hard enough to slam his head against the stone floor. It felt so raw, so hot with pain, and he wondered how deep the claws had gone. He heard a groan from his right, and just before he could turn, a thick blanket of snowfall rained on him and he felt a soft collision to his left.

He paused in the dark cover of the snow, bringing his hand to his head. The thing roared against the sky and then paused with confusion. It waited for minutes that felt like entire winters against Anowon's skin. The sound of the creature's breath seemed to rattle the walls. Then, confident that three warm pieces of meat and their talkative vampire companion had vanished from its sight, the thing scampered off in search of another meal elsewhere.

He kept still as he heard the snow shift around him, followed by Nadino's voice. "That was a sharp idea, captain. Now who's turning the ice red?"

It took a while for Anowon to rise. In the pause, he felt like he had heard the island speak to him again. Was it reassurance? Doubt? Were even the unknowable faduun laughing at him like a child? An anger and confusion boiled in him, and as it did, he felt dizzy and hollow.

Tarsa lifted his wounded body from the puddle of former snow and had begun to heal him when Anowon waved for his pack. He withdrew two vials of blood from it, taking his time to steady his hands around them.

Tarsa stepped back. "Whose blood was that?"

"The worms and roaches that skitter in the ruins are easy to bleed," Anowon grumbled, "and I need blood." He took the stopper out of one and brought it to his lips hungrily. Just the touch of it was enough to seal his wounds and restore his awareness. He turned over to see the other two adventurers sleeping huddled against each other, Jolly behind their heads like a heaving gnarlid pillow, and Tarsa kneeling beside them, struggling to wrap a cloth around his arm.

"Wait," Anowon said, getting up. "In my house, I had learned all manner of—"

"Don't treat me with any Malakir magics, vampire," Tarsa hissed. In his indignation, he pulled too taut on his bandage and winced.

"None, then." Anowon put his second flask down and raised his hands before him as he approached. "Let me wrap that for you."

Tarsa flinched as the vampire neared but eventually relaxed. Anowon took the edge of the wrap and circled his arm gingerly, taking in the wound. The hydra could have very well torn the man's arm off if he had hooked an inch deeper. Anowon took a breath at the sight of the blood, quelling his instinctual thirst. "Too tight?"

Tarsa shook his head. "Thank you."

"Nothing at all." Anowon smiled awkwardly. "Adventurers must look out for each other."

Something in his eyes struck Tarsa. "Why are you here?"

"I know this is inconvenient. As soon as dawn comes, we can find the—"

"No." Tarsa straightened up. "Why travel with us? Why keep questing at all? Every big house hates and fears you—the expeditionaries and the vampire houses both. Most common folk don't stand vampires at all. What is so important about this to you?"

Anowon stopped to find the words. “These stones are older than the names of some of your cities. When we think of Zendikar, we think of the deepest scars on the land—the ancient kor built this place long before those even appeared. Perhaps this place houses knowledge we can’t fathom. Maybe what they knew, what they learned, could change Zendikar.”

That was part of the truth. There were things he hoped to learn, things he secretly hoped would regain him favor. Perhaps the Skyclaves concealed secrets about Zendikar that he could compare to the Eldrazi histories that would reveal ancient magic behind the Roil, or even unlock the secret of creating new bloodchiefs by pure accident. Maybe their rising would be the beginning of a whole new era of calamity that he could prevent as penance for failing with the Eldrazi. And while he did cling to the idea that it would bring him glory to be the first to learn all of this he was also tired. So eager to heal the world, to never see it suffer again. Just to be able to study it without each truth revealing a wound on the land. To be at peace—with himself, with his studies, with the very soil of Zendikar.

“Alright.” Tarsa propped himself up with his blade so he could sit comfortably against the corridor wall. “I take it you’d like to study, even now. You have the eyes for it. Plus, someone’s got to keep watch, and they’d hate it if it were you.” He gestured to the corridor. “Go on. And for your own sake, call for help when you see it, not when it sees you.”

The vampire nodded, grabbing just the barest essentials from his pack and wrapping them in a loose cloth against his chest as he ventured deeper into the dark, following the jutting lines of stone.

The next dawn met Anowon in gleeful excitement. Simply being in the halls of a Skyclave gave him so much. He was no longer unravelling the rare noun or preposition from the etchings—they were becoming entire sentences. The leftmost outer line of the Ondu Skyclave was itself an entire treatise on its creation, on the work the kor forbearers were doing on the land here. Every chamber bore a trove on its walls alone. As far as he could see, their language of choice was a long line-trail marked at the edges briefly by parallel and intersecting paths to shape letters. He could make out the edges of the papers, mentions of *latest alchemical composites* and *variations of method* and *unintended results*. It was a shame that so many of the papers he found were petrified or soaked through. By the time all he had read could finally come to rest in his mind, he knew the next step.

He returned to the entrance corridor and signaled for Tarsa to follow. The rest of the party was awake and joined them, with Eret tending to the captain’s wounds as they walked. “We were just about to look for you,” the warrior said, glancing at the blade of his broadsword before putting it away. “Let’s find Grakmaw, so we have no reason to stay here another night.”

“The walls may be able to assist,” Anowon said, beaming with the joy of knowledge.

Nadino frowned. “Now isn’t the time to gloat about history. We should stay on mission—”

“I am on mission.” He gave Tarsa a confident stare. “Trust me.”

He led them back into the corridor, into its weird perpendicular intersections that split into even more stone rooms with walls thicker than their paths. Some were former potions rooms where now only broken glass and wild grass teeming with insects remained. Others were large halls stained dark with all manner of things that happened before the Skyclave sank. As they walked, Anowon’s eyes followed the path of the etchings and spoke what they read softly: “The facility at the continent of Ondu, constructed to attempt fine developments of weaponry and siege tools for potential conflict with external forces “

“Which other forces?” Nadino found himself whispering.

Anowon could imagine an answer—what if an opposing force had emerged from another world, as he had seen? But history told another story. “This was the Skyclave that rebelled against the ancient kor capital at Makindi. When this one fell, and took the capital with it, it also buried their entire civilization.”

“So this is a weapons cache?” Tarsa clapped his hands eagerly. “I’ve been longing to see what an ancient kor blade feels like in the hand. It looks like you won’t be leaving with any relics, Anowon.”

Anowon raised a pile of stone-coated scrolls wrapped in cloth. “I imagine I’ve gotten prize enough from this place. We need only finish our work.”

“So where are you taking us?” Eret stared at the tessellations, as if hoping he could unravel them.

“They kept a proving room in this Skyclave—a chamber to test their experiments. Many of them were not inanimate.”

“They experimented on the beasts here “ Nadino shook their head. “They must have found ways to warp the wildlife. Either with the land’s own magic, or through their own work. This Skyclave it could very well be what made Grakmaw.”

“And many other things. They uncovered through science what the Eldrazi would have exposed through brutality,” Anowon replied almost thoughtlessly. “They revealed that this world is raw, crying out. That it has its own will, and we keep imposing ours instead of listening to it.”

They finally came to a pair of stone double doors as tall as the Skyclave itself, held ajar by wild vines that had broken through their center and pulled them open just enough for a slender body to pass. Nadino used their blade to cut through the vines, and the greenery writhed and struggled against the pain. As the wizard slid through, Tarsa and Eret forced the door wider for themselves, stirring dust and rattling the walls with the grating of untouched stone.

They entered to watch Nadino glance down at a pile of scrapped cloth. It was in their party colors, the scarf-cloth of a kor, but with barely enough thread left to cover a hand. They glanced up at Tarsa, fighting tears. “That damned thing dragged him here tore him up “

Tarsa put a sturdy hand on their shoulder. “I know this hurts. That’s why we’ve come. For our turn. Steady yourself.”

Anowon watched the scene from his periphery as he studied the wide hall. This was it. Wide and tall enough that a hydra could wreak havoc on unsuspecting livestock—or even the rare elf—brought to slaughter, with high balconies for the researchers to study from above. The hydra must have surely been much smaller back then—the one they saw could very well have climbed up the pillars to make a meal of those who would stand above. Perhaps it had tried, and succeeded, even then. “We’re ready for it here.”

Tarsa snapped his fingers. “When it arrives, Nadino, get higher ground and keep moving to hit it. I’ll try the same. Eret, focus on sustaining Nadino and be prepared to help us flee. And Anowon—”

The vampire ignored them, lost in ransacking the cupboards of the halls for anything that survived the fall of these peoples. Indeed, dozens of vials and papers, unscarred and unbroken, lay within, and he sunk as many of them as he could into his pack.

“Damned sage!” Tarsa strode over to him. “After all you’ve told us, you should damn well know we can’t let you leave with any of these poisons.”

“We made an arrangement, Tarsa.” He spoke calmly, not with the derision of his former self. “This is just for research, I assure you—”

"I don't care. If a single soul could do what these things do, they could tear entire villages apart do you want people to learn that? To be able to mix themselves a horror?"

"These studies can be useful in kinder hands. In Sea Gate, or—"

"Any hands that know how to twist Zendikar are the wrong hands."

There was a chittering screech from above. Tarsa snapped his fingers, and his colleagues took positions, their grappling hooks launched to the balcony edges, poised to swing above the floor. "Anowon!" Tarsa shouted. "Be ready to go up."

He sighed as he nodded, adjusting the hooks on his clothes, making a mental note to fix the ropes later. "Until then?"

"We draw it in."



Grakmaw, Skyclave Ravager | Art by: Filip Burburan

Nadino took that as a cue to howl into the chamber, and Eret followed. Grakmaw replied by shrieking into the day, charging through the upper halls of the Skyclave and stumbling down from the roof into the chamber. As it fell, the party made their moves—Nadino striking its underbelly with sharp spikes of ice and the edges of their own climbing hooks, Tarsa propelling himself upward from his ropes with somersaulting slashes as he flanked the kor.

Anowon struggled to keep up. He was never much of a hunter. He only gained more fervor by finally succumbing to his thirst: this would make a fine drink of blood when it died, and he might even enjoy drinking it more while it lived. He aimed to choke one neck with the spares of his rope, hoping gravity

and weight would do most of the work. It barely budged through the flesh of it, instead dragging a head down for an easy strike.

Tarsa took advantage and peeled through its chin with his blade, circling it to finish the rest of the face. He knew the resulting wound would only hold for so long before a new row of uneven spiked teeth and piercing eyes emerged from it. Nadino had the same problem with the farthest head—a stray fireball to the throat opening a path for two more writhing jaws to emerge, one nipping at the space mere feet before their staff. Jolly, for its part, could barely nip at the thing's hind claws, but soldiered on.

This already wasn't working, Anowon concluded. Any more recklessness like this and they were meat. He cut his rope and rolled out of the hydra's view, retreating into his pack for something he would recognize.

"You had better not desert us, you wretched—!" Nadino couldn't break their focus long enough to keep cursing him. "What are you doing?"

"Searching for answers!" he cried out, glancing at the colors of the vials he had put away. Deep red and powder blue and lush dark green and even more colorful potions shone through glass and light, splashing within their bottles. He knew he had read some of the compositions the ancient kor had success with. One of these must give them the advantage.

He found it. A cloudy yellow in a bottle, barely as big as his finger, that seemed to change state on its own from wispy gas to solid amber stone. The papers described it as a potential suppression tool, something to keep combatants and wild beasts still. He hadn't gotten far enough to tell in what manner, however. "Get higher!"

He reached into his pouch for another hooked rope and aimed for the balcony. The hydra would notice him soon enough, and he was in better range than the rest to be ground fine between its teeth. He heaved himself up as quickly as he could manage, making sure not to break the bottle in his grip.

Grakmaw bared all its heads, full of all its teeth, at him alone. It reached out at his rope and only barely missed. One scratch at his arm nearly made the vampire slip, and the bottle dropped from his hand. He muttered a curse, eyes fixed on the falling bottle. Just then, a small blade came dancing into view, shattering the glass against the lip of an incoming hydra head as it spun, honed metal tearing through its cheek. Anowon turned just in time to see Nadino pull back their hand.

As the bottle broke, the potion burst into a cloud of dust in the hydra's face, spreading slowly down its neck like a cloud rolling over a hill. Everything it touched turned gray and jagged, as if boiling its skin and petrifying it all at once, sealing the dagger into the side of its head. In a matter of seconds, all the beast's heads were sharp, spiked stone, pointing upward toward the party with its many open mouths. The body beneath scampered, as if hoping to escape the fate it was now trapped in, before the weight of the heads brought it stumbling downward, each one cracking off of its form with an echo that rang through the open roof.

The sound alone knocked Anowon back down. He scrambled to get upright, to get further from the bottle's contents, but the magic had finished its work. All that was left to harm him began to spread down a single index finger as he stood, fearful, unbreathing. And then it stopped, just before the joint, and he fell to his knees, exhausted and relieved.

Nadino shouted from their ropes, grinning. "Whatever happened to dying carefully, you wretched vampire?!"

The heads would never soften.

"Same deal as before, then," Tarsa admonished, preparing to tie them to Anowon's pack.

The vampire sighed, unmoving. "I understand."

Just then, Eret nudged him with his elbow. "Of course not. We split the weight. After all, now it's our fastest way down."

He and Nadino fastened their ropes to the Skyclave's mouth, sliding all the way down with the momentum of a stone-dead hydra on their backs.

On their way back to the beach, Tarsa put his hand on the vampire's shoulder. "You endured a lot from us without complaint. We were vile to you. And you still saved us." He gestured to the small cloth-bound pile on Nadino's pack, the remains of their lost Orien, as he added, "You let us avenge our partner, and pay respects." He smiled warmly. "Thank you. You're free to be our fourth hook whenever you wish."

Anowon nodded, smirking to himself. He had only just begun to notice that this feeling was what he longed for the entire time. Not glory, not prestige, but belonging. To know that his knowledge had value. He hoped that this feeling would linger, that he could unravel more of the ancient past of Zendikar and share that knowledge just for more of this feeling.

Meanwhile, behind him as they walked, Nadino held back a laugh, scratching the top of Jolly's head as it wrapped its hungry, slobbering jaws around a loose stack of scrolls in Anowon's pack. Just as he noticed, he paused to ponder if he could possibly lose as much as he had gained already.

When the answer came to him, he grinned, and turned around to scratch beneath the gnarlid's chin.