
The Archmage of Goldnight

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From set *Eldritch Moon*

08. 06. 2016

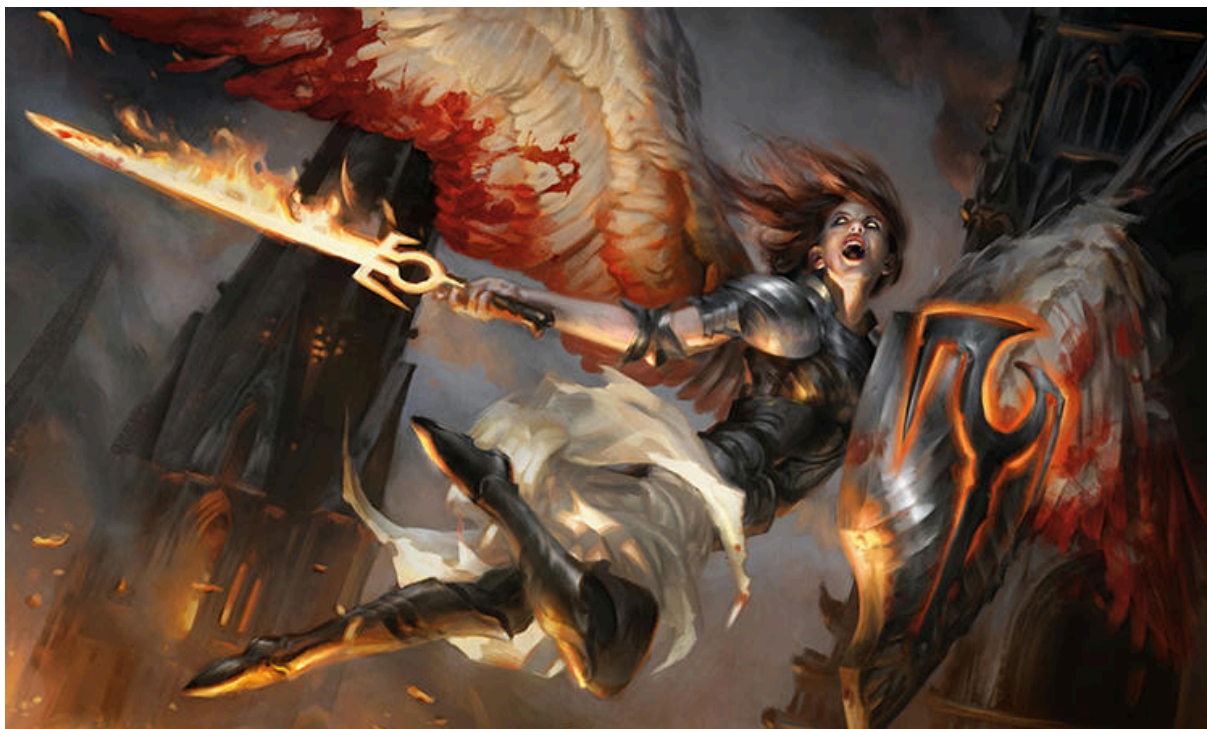
The world of Innistrad has been descending into madness for some time now; from cultists to cathars, no mind is safe. Even angels have fallen prey. Avacyn herself went mad, transforming from protector to monster and wreaking unimaginable devastation upon even the most faithful in her church. Then she was destroyed. With its angelic protector gone, Innistrad was exposed to overwhelming forces of darkness and evil. Now, the few on the plane who have not yet lost their minds are left to wonder if this is the end. As the world tilts off balance, beginning its final descent, the people pray for anything or anyone powerful enough, good enough, to stand in Avacyn's place, to protect them from the maddening darkness.

Present Day

The scent of angel's blood. There was nothing like it in all the Multiverse: a biting bouquet, sweet and brackish, tinged with spice and sharp with power. The aroma met Arlinn's wide wolf nostrils as she raced up the sheer incline of a gorge toward the town of Lambholt under siege. She snarled at the smell of it, cursing. She hadn't been fast enough. She should have been the one to draw the blood, to fell the angel, to earn its wrath. She was the protector of the Ulvenwald.

Faster.

She had witnessed the mad angel's descent on Lambholt from afar; the divine being had dived down, past the rooftops and steeples. Cries of horror and flashes of light had followed. Moments later, the angel had surfaced, wings bloody and sword aflame, only to plunge in once more.



Flameblade Angel | Art by Cynthia Sheppard

Though Arlinn hadn't seen all that had happened beyond the rooftops, she could imagine it well enough. There was only so much that mad angels did. They were broken, inconsolable, shrieking and crying of Avacyn's death as they careened through the sky. It seemed impossible that the angel was truly gone, but there was no denying the hole in the fabric of Innistrad. A hole that was filling rapidly with wails of innocents, roars of flames, and cackling of corrupted beings.

The desperate trumpet of a cathar's horn—a Goldnight's, she knew the tenor—spurred Arlinn on. She summoned strength from the forest, pumping the thick muscles of her legs, pushing herself up the slope. *Faster*. But she feared it was already too late. Blood had been shed, and not just angelic. Human blood too. The cathars. Arlinn could picture them, holy weapons raised, magical invocations on their lips. But they would not be blessed with the power they prayed for; Avacyn was not there to answer their prayers.

Years Ago

"Arlinn Kord, in being here tonight, you have answered the call of the holy protector, Avacyn. There is no greater blessing than that which you are about to receive. Please step forward."

Archmage Reeves stood on the altar of Goldnight, gesturing for Arlinn to join him and Archmage Rembert. The archmages could have no idea how much this moment meant to Arlinn. They would never understand fully—she couldn't tell them. It was so much more than the archangel's sacrament, extraordinary though that may be; to her, it was freedom. But if she were to explain that to the holy men before her, it would all be over.

Arlinn rose from her bent position of supplication and ascended the stairs to meet the two archmages. Reeves didn't look at her, but Rembert shifted his gaze, a smile on his thin lips. Arlinn returned the smile as best she could, her lips trembling. She fixed her eyes on the familiar sights around her in an attempt to quell the alternating swells of anxiety and anticipation that surged through her. The chapel

at Elgaud Grounds was small but far from simple. The altar shone with golden detail bearing the symbol of Avacyn. Thick white fabrics were draped from the ceiling on all sides, creating the feeling of a protected alcove, which was filling with clouds of incense, peaceful yet powerful.

“In the name of Avacyn and with the power vested in me by her holy church, I confer upon you this blessing,” Archmage Reeves began to chant. Arlinn knew the words well. She had listened to this prayer countless times over the past years as the sole cathar who had been present at every archmage’s ceremony of blessing. She had watched those who had gone before her stand on this very altar and receive the highest sacrament. Each time, she had wondered if it would ever be her; each time, from her seat in the pew nearest the altar, she had doubted herself; and each time, from the same seat, she had reminded herself to believe in the power of Avacyn. Now, here she was.

Archmage Reeves held up the thick gold chain with the shining medallion, the mantle of Goldnight. “Arlinn Kord, I present you with this mantle, the symbol of Avacyn’s endless love and ceaseless protection.”

At the correct moment, Arlinn bowed her head, and Reeves slipped the chain around her neck. The medallion was heavier than she had imagined. She could feel the weight of it on her chest and she could sense its holy power. It was the power she needed, the power that she had come here seeking. Light. Goodness. Truth.

She knew she was supposed to stand still, unmoving for the duration of the ceremony, yet she couldn’t stop herself from touching it, allowing it to rest in her palm, running her fingers around its circumference. It was beautiful and pure, and now it was hers.

Archmage Rembert’s hand clasped her shoulder. “You must know how proud I am,” he whispered as Reeves continued the chant.

A swell of emotions collected in Arlinn’s throat, preventing her from responding, but she met Rembert’s eyes, willing him to see her gratitude in her gaze. He had been her constant over the years, a mentor who had pushed her, been patient with her, and helped her to hone her strengths. He knew her better than anyone—and yet, even he did not know the truth.

Arlinn abruptly averted her gaze from his. How many times had she wanted to tell him? But she could not. If he knew the truth about her, about what she was, his hand would be forced against her. The clot of emotions in her throat loosed itself and seeped down into her chest, turning into icy-cold guilt. Arlinn shrunk from it. She had promised herself that she would not feel this guilt any longer, not after tonight, but it wasn’t as easy to dismiss as she wished it were. Images of her wards, hundreds of them that she had crafted against the curse of lycanthropy, flashed across her mind. The feeling of the moonlight on her skin. The howls she heard late at night. She had kept the secret all this time, from all of them. She had to. A lycanthrope could not be an archmage of Goldnight, and Arlinn had to become an archmage of Goldnight. It was this blessing that would save her from her curse.

The blessing of Avacyn was stronger than the evil inside her. It would repress the savagery. All these years, this is what she had been working toward. After tonight, she would be able to trust herself. Finally, and absolutely.

She breathed out, a breath it seemed she had been holding for years. She looked back up at Rembert and held his gaze as Reeves completed the chant of Goldnight.

“And now, we pray, together.” Reeves nodded to Arlinn, and she joined him as he began the final prayer. “Dear, Avacyn, protector of all, Holy One who grants us power, we—”

"It's an attack!" The shout sliced through the incense-laden air, and the thick white drapes billowed, exposing the altar to a gust of cold wind that came through the door. "Devils in Havengul! Hordes of them!" It was Cathar Leighton who was shouting, running up the aisle toward the altar, his sword raised. "The Flight of Goldnight sent for you." He stumbled up the steps to Reeves. "They asked for the aid of the archmages."

"Then we ride!" Reeves shrugged off the ceremonial robe he was wearing, already following Leighton back down the aisle.

Rembert followed suit. "Archmage Kord, your blade!"

Arlinn started. That was her. He was calling her. An archmage. "But the prayer. We didn't finish." She knew it was a foolish thing to say in such a moment, but her mind was reeling, her emotions raw. All this time she had been anticipating this moment, and now it was as though it had been left dangling, as a thread from a riding cloak, just as likely to be torn away as to unravel the rest of the cloak. She needed to know it was done; she needed to know she was finally and fully an archmage.

Rembert opened his mouth as though to chide her, but then his gaze softened as he met her eyes. He paused at the door. "You asked me before this night began if I believed you were ready to become an archmage of Goldnight."

Arlinn nodded. "I did."

"And what I said then remains true now. In my mind you have been an archmage since you first arrived. Never have I seen a brighter, more promising student. Now you have in name what you have always had in heart. You are one of the Goldnight, Arlinn Kord, bound by the sacrament that holds us together, bound to the angel and to each other, always. Completed ceremony or no, it is official."

Arlinn attempted a smile. "All right." It was official. She could live with that. Though she wished she felt it more strongly; she had imagined that in the moment she would feel a rush of power and freedom.

"And now the Goldnight have been called to ride." Rembert opened the door. "We must go."

"Yes, we must." Arlinn hurried down the aisle.

Rembert cleared his throat as they hastened through the door. "Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't do the duty of the church and ensure the final prayer is complete."

"Oh?" Arlinn looked to the archmage.

"Say it with me as we go. Dear, Avacyn, protector of all," Rembert began.

Together they completed the final prayer to Avacyn, calling the words out between heaving breaths of biting cold air as they raced across Elgaud Grounds toward the stables. By the time she climbed onto her horse, Arlinn was an archmage; she felt it in her soul.

They found the town of Havengul ablaze. As Leighton had warned, hordes of wicked devils hung from every bough, swung from the rafters, and danced in the streets. A group of a dozen or so of the fiends cavorted across the town's highest rooftops, launching fireballs at anything that was not already burning, and more just to add to the flames. One perched on an old man's head, slashing at his face from above with its needle-like fingers, while two others hung from the man's hands to prevent him from swatting the first away. Another of the devils toyed with a young man who was only barely conscious, scraping foul designs into his skin with its dirt-encrusted nails, letting just enough blood to keep him alive while causing just enough pain that he wished he was not. Their laughter rang out above the crackling flames, their lungs unaffected by the choking smoke that had driven so many of the townsfolk to their knees. Arlinn hated them instantly.



Art by Filip Burburan

Flight Goldnight had arrived just before the cavalry, and now the archmages and cathars joined the battle begun by the angels. Their first priority was to establish a sanctuary. An angel, Freydaia, blessed a small church, casting a spell of protection over it, and under Rembert's orders Arlinn and the others began shuttling victims to safety. They were to save the innocents first, and when that was through, deal with the wicked.

Arlinn crouched next to the burning remains of an upturned carriage, reaching underneath its hot wooden body for the unwilling hand of a small boy. Another angel, Olaylie, hovered above, holding at bay a mass of devils that threatened to leap down from a nearby rooftop.

"They won't be deterred much longer," Olaylie called down to Arlinn. The angel impaled one of the devils with her spear, but at the same time, four more jumped up to grab her weapon, engaging in a vicious tug-of-war.

Arlinn extended her fingers farther toward the boy. She had to hurry. "Give me your hand," she begged. The child shook his head. The carriage creaked above him. "The devils, they'll get me with their fire if I go out there."

Arlinn didn't want to say that if he didn't come out he would meet a fiery death all the same; she didn't want to frighten him any more than he was. "I know you're scared," she said, "but you don't have to be. I'll protect you, and so will that angel up there." She reached again for his hand, but still the boy cowered.

"But you are just two, and there are so many devils." He peered up through a slit in the wood as a fiery board broke away from the body of the carriage and crashed to the ground at Arlinn's side.

They were running out of time, but Arlinn could not make the boy trust her, so she turned to her faith. "Do you know of Avacyn?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Then you must know that she is more than I could ever be, more than even that holy angel could ever be. Avacyn will help you if we cannot."

The boy considered Arlinn's words. She could not tell what was going on behind his wide brown eyes—all she could do was hope that she had convinced him. "Say the prayer with me," she urged. "Together we'll ask for Avacyn's aid." She chose the most familiar of the prayers she knew, hoping that he would know it too. "Dear, Avacyn, we pray to you now in our time of need. We ask that you—"

"How do you know?" The boy interrupted the prayer. "How do you know she'll help?" he pressed. "And I want a serious answer. Not just something you say to make me come out. I know how adults work, and I'm not going to go out there with the devils just because you say so."

It was Arlinn's turn to consider the child. She could hear Olaylie's wings beating furiously above them, and feel the heat of the devils' flames. But more pressure came from his stare than from the other two combined. "I will give you the most serious answer I know," she said. "I know that Avacyn will help if you pray because she has helped me. Something very bad happened to me once, and I was afraid I was alone. But then I learned I was not. Avacyn saved me."

The carriage above them tilted. "Hurry, Archmage Kord!" Olaylie called from above.

"Give me your hand. Please." Arlinn stretched as far as she could manage, the tips of her fingers coming just short of the boy's elbow.

"You're an archmage?" the boy's expression changed from one of doubt to awe.

"I am." Arlinn nodded down to the medallion that hung around her neck as she braced her back against the hot, sagging wood.

"That's something," the boy said. "All right." He moved cautiously, and ever so slowly. Arlinn held her breath as his small hand reached for hers.

The carriage groaned above them like a beast. Arlinn began her own prayer. *Dear Avacyn give me the strength to save this innocent child*. She felt the mantle of the Archmage flare to life against her chest. The blessing of Avacyn stirred deep within her. Aloud she prayed for the boy, "Protector of our world, please see us safely to your sanctuary." The stirring became an overwhelming flood of holy power. As the boy's hand touched hers, Arlinn yanked him out from under the carriage with a divine might that sent them both rolling across the ground just as the carriage collapsed.

The angel Olaylie dove, shielding Arlinn and the boy from the fiery shards of wood and the attacks launched by the devils. The boy wailed.

"We're all right," Arlinn buried her nose in the boy's matted hair, breathing in the scent of his life. "You're all right." She rocked him, stroking his face. "I'm going to get you to the church now." She lifted her hand from his head and her breath caught in her throat. Her fingers had come away covered with blood. Her heart postponed its next beat; it refused to sustain her life until she knew that the boy would live. She searched his head for the source of blood, searched his shoulders, his neck. Nothing. But there was more blood. And then more of it. A drop of red fell on Arlinn's own hand. She looked up.

Olaylie was lurching through the sky with a devil on her back. It clawed at her hair with its needle fingers. A second devil jumped on her leg and a third on her shoulder. All dug their wicked hands into her pure flesh. The angel screamed.

Arlinn had never seen an angel bleed. It was as though it was she who had been sliced across the face, as though it was her cry of agony that echoed through the town.

A drop of blood landed on Arlinn's cheek. She could smell it; the angel's blood smelled of the trees of the woods, the air of the heavens, and the waters of the sea. It was a heady aroma, heavy with holy power. It did not belong outside of the angel's body. She moved to help, calling to the angel in desperation, "Olaylie!" But then she remembered the boy, crouched in the crook of her arm. She looked down to him; angel's blood was smeared across his face.

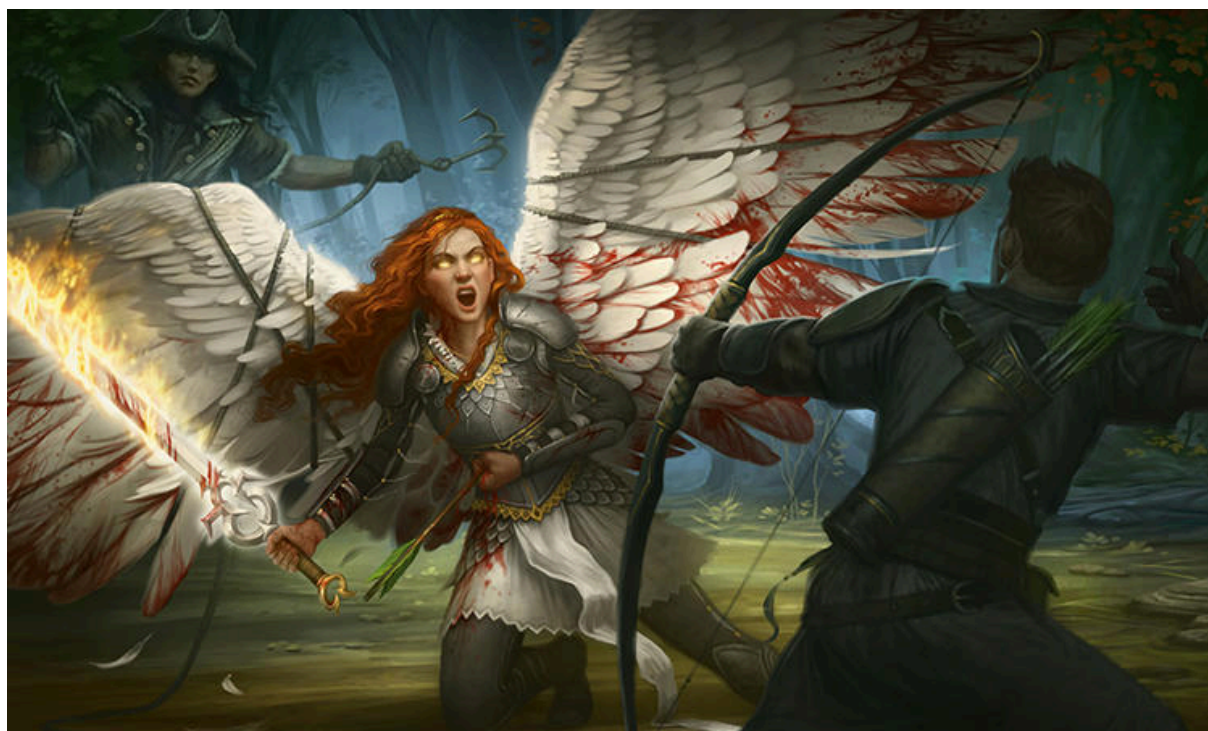
"Save the child first, Archmage Kord!" Olaylie's voice boomed from overhead; it was a command, but it was followed by a softer plea. "Arlinn, please, save the child first."

It was all Arlinn could do to avert her eyes from the sight of the devils tearing into the angel's skin; if she watched a moment longer she would not be able to heed Olaylie's command. She offered her hand again to the boy. "Come with me."

This time he didn't hesitate. He let her guide him through the center of Havengul, running toward the sanctuary, his tiny voice intoning as they went. "Dear Avacyn, please help that angel. Stop the devils from making her bleed. They're hurting her."

Present Day

"In the name of Avacyn, the fallen protector, I will strike you down!" The wail of a mad angel's voice rang out as Arlinn crested the gorge. She plowed ahead only to skid to a stop, claws digging into the forest floor, as a clearing opened up before her. The mad angel was on the ground in the center of the ring of trees. Arlinn stayed low in the brush; remaining undetected would give her the advantage. She peered through the branches, breathing in great mouthfuls of air laced with angel's blood. The angel was bound with rope, an arrow protruding from her gut, wings bloodied. Cathars surrounded her on all sides, their weapons poised. In spite of all of it, the angel was the one with the upper hand. She was a being of unfathomable power, made all the more potent in her madness.



Clip Wings | Art by Howard Lyon

“Impure!” the angel shrieked at the cathars. “All of you are impure!” Her sword flashed with fiery magic as she twisted against the ropes. She screamed, a sound of spiteful rage that made Arlinn raise her hackles.

Arlinn’s instincts told her to protect the cathars. Baring her teeth, she stalked through the brush, pacing; there was only so long she would wait for an opening before striking.

“Hold her fast!” A familiar voice gave Arlinn pause. Her ears swiveled. “Don’t let up on those ropes!” Arlinn’s legs went stiff; it couldn’t be. But there was no mistaking the archmage as he stormed around from behind the angel, barking orders to the other cathars. “Archers, take aim.” Though Rembert’s face was red from effort and crusted in dirt, the three long, white scars that ran across his cheek and down his jaw shone in the moonlight.

Arlinn’s stomach turned at the sight, at the memory. She backed into the thicker trees, her tail down. Her hind paw landed on a branch. If she had not been so unsteadied by the sight of Rembert, her wild instincts would have taken over, guiding her body, shifting her balance, but in this moment she was more human than wild, and her human mind was reeling, distracted, too slow. The branch snapped—and so too did the angel’s head, spinning round, her gaze fixing directly on the woods where Arlinn was concealed. An unsettling smile spread across her face, and the angel lifted her hand. “A monster!” She pointed at Arlinn. “There in the trees! A monster!”

A handful of the cathars turned to look, Rembert included. He picked the werewolf out of the trees before the others; he knew what he was looking for. His eyes locked with Arlinn’s and he lifted his hand to his face, fingers tracing the longest of the scars. A tremor ran up Arlinn’s spine.

“Oi! Werewolf!” another of the cathars cried, rousing Arlinn from the trance of the past.

The holy men and women stepped back reflexively from the werewolf, closer to the angel—*no!* Arlinn wanted to cry out, but it would only be a growl, it would only make it worse. It was already worse. That moment of lapsed vigilance was all the angel needed. In a display of mad strength, she spread her wings with enough force to cast off the ropes that bound her.

“Stop her! Hold the ropes!” The cathars cried out, but too late.

The angel took flight. Hovering in the air above, she tore the arrow from her gut and hurled it down at the youngest of the cathars. “Impure! I strike you down!”

Arlinn keened as the young woman fell to the ground, lifeless. Her wild nature took over and she lunged at the angel, jaws open—only to close around a thick branch. Rembert was wielding the branch as a weapon, against her. He yanked it back and wound up to swing again. Arlinn dodged, her hindquarters coming out from under her as she slipped on the mud of the clearing slick with angel’s blood. She scrambled back to her feet, but yelped as Rembert’s third swing caught her tail.

“Get her!” Rembert cried to the other cathars; he swung again at Arlinn as she ducked behind the cover of a broken stump. “Get the monster!”

Blades slashed and arrows flew—some at the angel and some at Arlinn.

Stop! She wanted to tell Rembert to stop. She wanted to tell him she was no longer the monster he had known. In truth, she never had been.

Years Ago

“Take him! Take the boy!” Archmage Arlinn Kord thrust the small child into Rembert’s outstretched arms. She didn’t wait to see them retreat into the safety of the sanctuary before turning to race back down the steps, her blade drawn.

Her vision blurred with the smoke from the devils’ fires, but not so much that she couldn’t make out the horror before her. There were at least a dozen devils hanging from Olaylie, pulling at her hair, plucking out her feathers, and slicing through her skin.

“No!” Arlinn cried. “Get away!”

The devils cackled and launched fiery spells down at Arlinn. She deflected the fire with her blade and pressed forward, closer. “I will make you cease your laughing!”

As though her words had been the punch line of a terrible joke, the fiends succumbed to vicious howls, their bony legs shaking with mirth. The one on Olaylie’s head pointed at Arlinn and cried out, a shriek that the others seemed to take as a command. In unison, they heaved back, yanking on the angel’s wings, sending Olaylie plummeting to the ground. They rioted with glee as she crashed down, tumbling across the dirt, unable to take flight again.

Arlinn charged at them, channeling all of her might, all of the divine power she could reach into her blade. She prayed as she did. “Avacyn, guide me. Give me your holy power—if there was ever a time, I need it now.” She raged through the fire the devils spat at her, unafraid to burn. Her sword struck one straight through the chest. She pulled it out and lashed at another. Then a third. But before she could strike again, a dozen devils rained down from above, having jumped from the rooftops.

Arlinn barely had time to intone a silent prayer, *Avacyn, there are too many, help me*. She was grabbed from behind with needle-like fingers that tore through her jacket. She spun around, slicing for the devil, but it had attached itself to her back. She felt the weight of another join it, and then a third. Tails lashed around her neck, scorching hot. Nails latched into her shoulders and back, pulling her down. Laughter rang sharp in her ears as she was dragged to the ground. *Avacyn, please*.

There was no response.

The pain was great, but it was worse to see the angel before her, struggling against the suffocating horde. Between the blood and the devils, there was only red where the pure white of Olaylie had once been.

“No!” Arlinn fought to get up, but she too was being buried by the fiends. Tears or blood streaked down her cheeks, Arlinn did not know. This wasn’t right. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. She was an archmage of Avacyn. *Avacyn!* Arlinn fought through the scratching and biting, reaching for the medallion around her neck. Her fingers closed around the mantle of the archmage of Goldnight. *Avacyn, please, come to my aid*. She waited, opening herself to the power of the protector; she needed power to save the angel. But there was nothing.

From just beyond Arlinn’s reach, Olaylie cried out, a burst of sound released, finally, after she had resisted the pain for so long. The angel’s cry was laced with agony so great that it ripped the night in two.

Arlinn felt the power of the pain in Olaylie’s cry, and just like the night, she came apart.

The werewolf surged at the devils. Jaw snapping. Clenching around the throat of the nearest fiend. Ripping its head from its body. Launching it across the courtyard.

More.

Claws slashing through chests. Tearing off tails. Swiping bodies out of sight.

More.

Crunching through bones.

Seizing on flesh.

Piercing spines.

Carcasses flew.

More.

Feathers.

The werewolf's maw closed on feathers.

The taste of angel's blood. Intoxicating. Warm ambrosia. Perfect.

Shock shone in the angel's eyes. She pulled up, away, but not fast enough. The werewolf's claws struck the skin of the angel's leg, scraping down across the angel's calf and hooking into place. The pleasure of fouling that perfect skin was unmatched. The werewolf pulled the angel back to the ground and laid into its flesh with teeth.

"Get off!"

The werewolf turned at the sound of the voice. There was a human there, a man who raised his sword. The werewolf slit his gut straight down the center. Blood and organs spilled out.

More.

The werewolf turned back to the angel, but more humans closed in. The werewolf swiped at the blade of a swinging sword, knocking the sword out of the air, then hacked at the arm that wielded it, breaking it from the body. The human fell. The werewolf stepped on the severed limb, hard, breaking the bone just to feel it snap. The werewolf carved up the rest of the body.

Another human charged at the werewolf, sword and shield blazing with blinding light. A leap and the werewolf was behind the human. A lunge, a slashing of claws, and the human lay mauled on the floor at the werewolf's feet.

More.

One after another. They all fell at the werewolf's mercy.



Arlinn, Embraced by the Moon | Art by Winona Nelson

Then suddenly, a bolt struck the werewolf from above, drawing a wretched snarl. Another bolt—this one hit the werewolf’s back. The angel had recovered enough to take flight. The werewolf snarled. The angel hovered above, glowing golden through the dirt and blood that caked her skin. She took aim with a shaft of holy light.

The werewolf vaulted upward, leaping through the air, slashing wildly at the glowing angel. The werewolf’s claws struck first, and then teeth. A snap and the tip of the angel’s wing came away. A mouthful of feathers, cartilaginous bone, and angel’s blood.

The angel lost elevation. The werewolf leapt again, this time for the other wing. Tore it full off the angel’s body. The holy being plummeted from the sky.

As the werewolf stalked toward the fallen angel, the angel struggled to her feet, scrambling back, limping, trying to run, trying to fly, failing. The werewolf pounced, tackling the angel to the ground. Teeth sank into soft flesh. The angel’s cry melded harmoniously with the taste of its blood.

The werewolf would never have enough.

“Archmage Kord?” The call drew the werewolf’s attention. The werewolf turned, hungry. A human dressed in armor and robes pointed a trembling sword at the werewolf. “Arlinn?”

The werewolf cocked her head to the side. The name the man had spoken felt wrong, it pierced her like a knife.

The man lifted his hand, pointing at the werewolf’s chest. “Of all that is holy, it is you.”

The werewolf snarled, but her gaze was forced down. She saw the pendent that hung from a chain around her neck. Something tugged on the back of her mind. *Avacyn*. She snapped her jaws, averting her gaze. Her eyes landed on the ground. On the bodies. All around her were bodies. Fallen cathars. Too many of them. She knew them all. Leighton. Reeves.

Her mind burned.

No.

No.

“Oh, Arlinn, what have you done?”

The werewolf turned on Rembert, her rage swelling. Why had he come to her? Why had he spoken? This was his fault. She raised her hackles and growled. He took a step back, but she was faster, lunging, slashing, her claws digging trenches into his cheek. He cried out, brandishing his sword at her, backing away.

The blood bloomed red on his face. “You monster!”

The werewolf howled in anguish, the truth tumbling through her mind swelling, growing out of control, until reality filled every last crevasse and threatened to break through her skull.

Rembert raised his sword. “May Avacyn forgive you.”

The werewolf did not recoil. The blade would be a mercy. Let it strike. She could take no more.

The steel flashed, and the werewolf’s mind cleaved.

Many Years Later

For a very long time after that, Arlinn had believed Rembert. She had believed she was a monster. Something so horrifying and terrible that even Avacyn couldn’t save her. And then after that, for a very long time, she had been furious with the angel; Avacyn’s blessing was supposed to have been stronger than the curse, but in the end it hadn’t mattered that she was an archmage. Avacyn had failed her, the wards had failed her; lycanthropy had won.

She’d had a long time to think on these things; she had planeswalked that day, so long ago, when her mind had cleaved. Rembert’s sword had never struck her. Instead she had been thrown off the world, away from the horrors she had committed, away from the body of Archmage Reeves at her feet, away from the broken, bloodied, lifeless angel Olaylie, away from the glint in Rembert’s eyes. And she had landed in a forest on another world.

It had been impossible to measure the passage of time there; she hadn’t wanted to. Time should not have passed for her; her life should have ended. In a way it had. The other world was like a purgatory. While there, she never once regained her human form. She remained a monster on the outside, but at the same time she could not escape her human mind and the memories it held of her deeds. The two parts of her warred, and her soul was caught in the crossfire.

But in the end, Arlinn had been grateful for it; it was this state of double life that had forced her to see the truth.

She had been wrong to think that becoming an archmage would change who she was, what she was. From the very first, after the howls of the Mondronen werewolf pack had cursed her, she had looked outward, to wards, to prayers, to Avacyn. She had convinced herself so surely that the angel and the holy power of the church could fix her. But what she had missed was that she was not broken. Not in the way she thought. She was what she was and she always would be. She was savage and wild, a predator, but she was also good and true, a protector. She could not make one part of her disappear, she couldn’t run away from half of her essence. She had to be both. She had to trust herself to be whole. Her salvation was never something she should have asked from the angel Avacyn; it was to her.

It took many years, but finally Arlinn returned to Innistrad, trusting herself to set foot once more on the world she had left behind. That moment was the moment she truly gained control of her powers and of herself. Her transformations were easy now, under her control. Her mind was always her own, but it was augmented by the wild power of her physical form. She was no longer a husk, she was no longer pretending, hiding; she was everything she was meant to be.

Arlinn trod over the wet earth, her nose, exceptionally sensitive even in her human form, picking up on the familiar scents that linked to memories. Memories too numerous to count, all threatening to draw tears for the potency of heartache they wrested from her gut. It was the first time she had set foot on Elgaud Grounds in years. She had expected that the first step would be the hardest, but it was the next hundred—those that carried her to Archmage Rembert’s door—that proved nearly impossible.

She had thought she was ready. She had faced all the others; she had visited the graves, Reeves’s, Leighton’s, all of them. She had prayed in Avacyn’s churches across Nephalia, sending litanies of confessions and reparations; she had spoken to the angels, looked into their eyes, admitted her acts and stood in their shadows to be judged.



Reaper of Flight Moonsilver | Art by Magali Villeneuve

Rembert was the only one who remained. She held up her fist to knock on the door of his chamber, but she didn’t have to. His scent reached her nose an instant before his heavy hand fell on her shoulder. She spun round to face the aging archmage.

“How dare you?” Rembert was holding up a glowing ward; he had built protections against her. Arlinn’s heart twisted in agony. This was the same man who had believed in her, in the goodness of her soul, so completely before. Now she would not be surprised to learn that he didn’t think she had a soul at all. “How dare you set foot here on this holy ground?”

“Please, Archmage Rembert, I—”

“You monster! You murderous beast!” He tossed the ward at her chest and spat at her feet.

Arlinn recoiled. "Please," she tried again. "I know what you must feel, I know what I did. There is no way to make the past right. But I'm not what I was then. Now I am able to use what I have for good. I want to use that good here, with the Goldnight. I want to help. I am in control."

"Ha!" Rembert drew his holy sword. "Control is a lie you tell so you can live with yourself when you are like this." He waved his sword, indicating her human form. "But even now, even as you stand in that falsified flesh, you are a monster. You will always be a monster."

"I may be a werewolf, but I am not a monster." Arlinn held her ground, though he leaned closer with his blade, which was now aglow. "I am a Goldnight. And I always will be. You said as much yourself."

Rembert lunged for her, his palm colliding with her shoulder, launching her back against the door. He pressed the side of his blade to her neck. Arlinn refused to fight back—she would not allow him to push her toward savagery. "Whatever I said to you before I knew what you were, when you concealed the truth from me, you cannot use it against me now. You are not a Goldnight, Arlinn Kord, you never were."

Arlinn held Rembert's gaze. She could say nothing; the clot of emotions that had choked back her words so many years ago had returned now to do the same. But this time the clot had sharp edges, and they needled her like the devils' fingers, poking the inside of her throat and stabbing the backs of her eyes.

All at once Rembert broke their shared gaze. He let out a heaving sigh and stepped back. "Get out." He pointed down the hall, but averted his eyes, looking at the floor. "Leave these grounds, and never come back. If I ever see you again, I will strike you down."

Arlinn inhaled to speak, but Rembert's voice, thick with holy power, stifled her words. "Get out!"

Present Day

Arlinn had attempted retreat. She had not wanted to engage. But Rembert didn't leave that as an option. She was surrounded, backed against the edge of the gorge, cathars on all sides and Rembert before her, his thick branch raised over his head. "I warned you," he heaved the words at her, each one a heavy blow; his blunt weapon would come next. Arlinn braced herself. She could withstand more blows than he could know, and she would not allow him to drive her away when there was a mad angel so near.

As though beckoned, the mad angel swooped down from behind the cathars.

Arlinn couldn't warn them fast enough. She couldn't warn Rembert. The angel shrieked as it closed its bloody fingers around Rembert's arms and pulled him, gasping and wide-eyed, into the air.

The other cathars turned their weapons on the angel, and Arlinn rose up on her haunches, protective instincts taking control.

"No! Fall in!" Rembert cried to his cathars, still in command though he was dangling from the sky. "Don't turn your back on the monster! Kill the werewolf!"

The cathars appeared confused. Some shifted their aim back to Arlinn, others remained trained on the mad angel. The angel cackled, not unlike the devils, and her hands around Rembert's arms began to glow with a blood-tinged holy light. She would kill him there in the sky, snuff out his life with little effort.

One of the cathars loosed an arrow at the angel, but it fluttered uselessly over her shoulder. She snapped her teeth at the woman. "You'll be next, impure one!"

Enough. This had gone on long enough. Summoning strength into her thick muscles, Arlinn launched herself, leaping up over the heads of the staggering cathars. She found purchase on the heel of the angel's boot and drove her teeth into the leather, pulling downward and thrashing to one side as she did. The angel hit the ground with a resounding thud, Rembert tumbling from her grasp. Arlinn wasted no time. She pounced atop the holy being, sinking her teeth into its flesh. She was all muscle and sinew now, driven by the wild power of the curse of lycanthropy, the curse that had become for her a blessing.

The mad angel was dead in the matter of moments.

Arlinn turned, panting, to the cathars, but they were not immediately behind her; they had collected at the edge of the gorge, some on their stomachs, reaching over the side. Rembert was nowhere in sight. Arlinn's heart palpated and she raced for the gorge, her mind already filling in what must have happened.

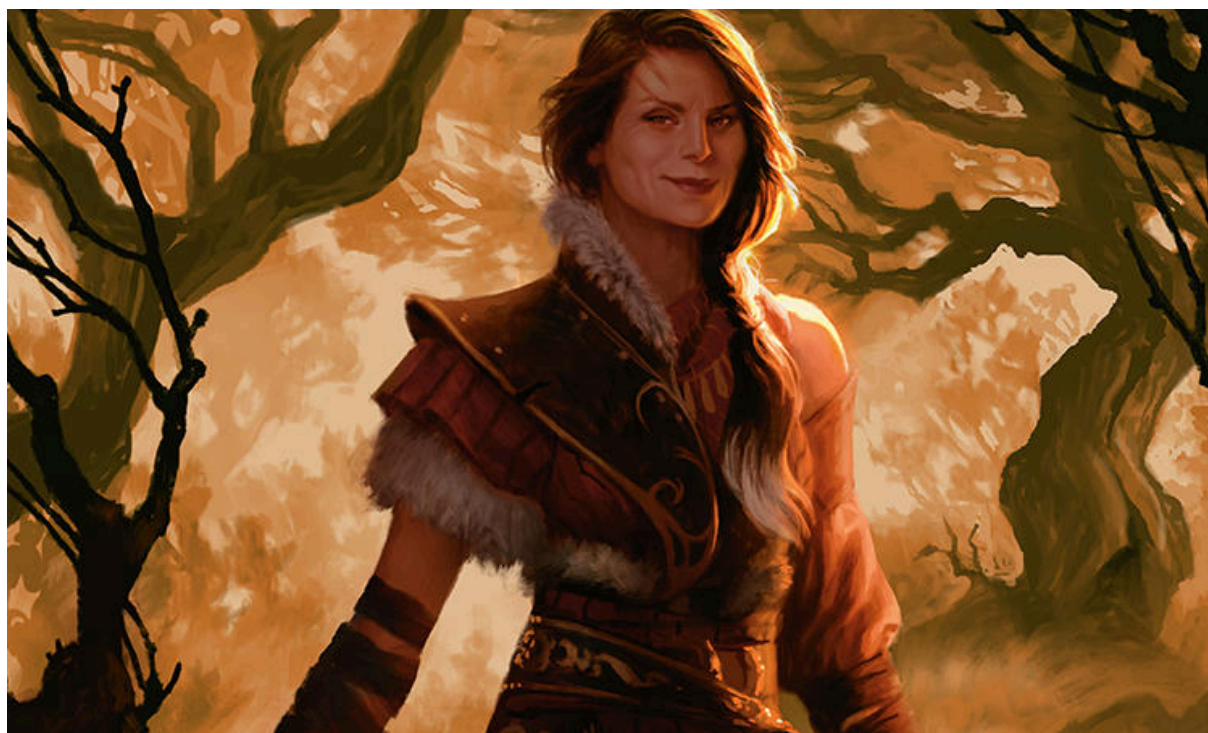
She was not wrong. She assembled the facts of the scene even as her body acted. Rembert was wounded, lying on a twisted trunk of a dead tree; it would not hold his weight for long. He was too far down to reach from the edge, so she had already climbed out onto another broken trunk. Gripping the wet wood with her claws, she hung down, offering her paw to Rembert.

He gasped at the sight of her, cowering, fear painting his expression.

She stretched her paw further, silently begging him to take it.

"Monster," Rembert finally found his voice. "I will kill you."

A rumble rose up in Arlinn's throat, but she swallowed it down. It was pain and fear that had brought those words to his lips. There was so very much pain between them. But there was also a bond. One of Goldnight. Always. Arlinn closed her eyes and welcomed the transformation to her human form; she would not let the archmage perish here tonight on account of fear. When she opened her eyes again, it was her human hand she saw reaching out before her. "Take my hand," she said to Rembert.



Arlinn Kord | Art by Winona Nelson

His eyes found hers. "You lied to me."

Arlinn swallowed. "I did."

"You killed the others."

"I did."

"I cannot—I will not—"

"I am no longer slave to the curse," Arlinn said. "I am free now to be a protector as I was meant to be. Please. You knew me once, know me again."

Rembert's eyes glistened behind tears as the trunk creaked under his weight.

Arlinn reached out anew. "Take my hand."

Rembert steeled himself and lifted his arm. "Avacyn help me," he whispered.

"Avacyn is gone," Arlinn said. "We must find strength in each other."