

Abzan: Siege Blossoms

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From set *Tarkir: Dragonstorm*

03. 03. 2025

One by one, Mehtma's seven charges filed into the underground cavern and straightened their spines at the lieutenant's gaze. Three were krumar, orphans adopted into House Mevak as Mehtma herself had been. Mehtma cleared her throat portentously to emphasize the gravity of her next statement.

"This is a private moment your cohort will share as a memory for the rest of your lives. It belongs to the seven of you alone. You *must* support each other from here on out. Do you understand?"

"Will we see our ancestors?" the little loxodon, Enti, squeaked.

The orc youth, Gohl, huffed softly in disdain.

Mehtma shook her head. "Our esteemed ancestors have not yet manifested in our tree."

Gohl burst out: "Our Kin-Tree was only planted two years ago from a cutting brought here from Anafeza's secret grove! Three different houses already requested the honor of the first graft, but we turned them all down."

The enthusiasm was appreciated. Mehtma held her hand up to forestall any further outbursts and continued. "Yes. Any cutting taken from a young Kin-Tree before the ancestors manifest will kill it. So, until our tree does manifest, we all take our turn at tending it as it grows. Our Kin-Tree is the strength of our house. We are bound together, root and branch. Our connection to each other is what makes us strong.

"Today the Kin-Tree will accept you into our house with the full honors and responsibilities of an adult. Afterward, knowing the passphrase means you can return to this chamber to seek peace or counsel, to tend the tree and commune with the heart of House Mevak. Listen carefully."

Pressing a hand to the latch, Mehtma spoke three words. A buzz vibrated through her palm. The pulse of locking magic faded, and a latch sprung into view. Mehtma grasped the warm bronze, pushed it down with a click, and stepped inside. The youths followed with solemn stares. She hoped they wouldn't dawdle at the tree. She desperately needed her morning coffee.

Like all of lower Qatros Karst, the chamber had been shaped from rock by talented earthcarvers. The space was as high as a guard tower; the entire population of the local house could gather in the grove if they crammed together. The walls glowed with life-giving light. A breeze slid through from cunningly carved shafts that reached all the way to the cliff face; cycling spells kept the air moving. Empty benches were arrayed around the wall of the chamber.



Art by: Forrest Imel

Only two years ago, the Kin-Tree had been little more than a fragile sapling. Now, it rose to twice Mehtma's height. Its scant canopy shimmered with tender leaves nourished not by sunlight but by the faith and loyalty of House Mevak. Yet she saw no sign of buds—not until the ancestors flowered into the sacred tree and their golden spirit-flowers blossomed through it.

A house member was always on duty in this hallowed chamber. This morning Cemil, the warden's assistant, swept over on the far side of the tree. He was tall and slender now, with dark hair and a trim beard, a krumar like her, brought into Mevak years ago.

He'd always been bland, dutiful, and eminently ignorable. Not at all ambitious, he'd stuck close to home. Nothing like her! Mehtma was ready to make a name for herself, to see Abzan in all its glory, to serve Khan Felothar.

Yet here she was, stuck educating children during an ongoing siege.

She restrained another sigh as the cohort lined up. The weekly post should have arrived by now. Maybe an official letter from the khan would finally grant her request to be assigned as captain of logistics, a position she was eminently more qualified for than that swaggering loudmouth, Captain Jurjis. House Agach didn't even have a Kin-Tree!

She tried to turn her thoughts back to the ritual at hand. At her nod, each youth knelt and placed their palm against the trunk. After a moment, each made a soft "oh" of surprise as the tree acknowledged their presence in some unseen way. The ritual and its weighty presence always calmed her disordered thoughts.

With the ritual complete, she led the youths out of the chamber. The door sealed behind them, absorbing the latch to leave a smooth surface that could not be opened by any means.

“Go on,” she said. “The kitchen’s waiting for you.”

Mehtma entered her office. The small chamber was sparsely furnished: chair, desk, shelf, cabinet, and a single chest. The walls were unadorned rock. Her one luxury was the door itself, which bore an elaborate carving of a Kin-Tree in full flower, and in the corner, her armor cabinet, locked by magic that dispelled at her touch. She kept her gear polished and oiled, inspected it every day, in case the call from the khan finally came. That’s all she asked, and yet still she had received no reply.

She edged her books aside and began writing yet another letter.

A scrape outside announced an arrival. Her loxodon aide Vauti opened the door bearing her morning coffee tray. Once, Vauti would have brought an entire pot. But rationing had reduced her portion to a single cup a day. Still, the aroma and the anticipation kept Mehtma’s temper in check.

Right up until Vauti set the tray on her desk with a flap of their ears and lifted the little lid off the coffee cup.

Mehtma stared, aghast, into the inky black liquid. “Where’s my cream?”

Vauti’s trunk ruffled. “Our stables have been blockaded by the militia.”

“For what purpose? Our horses were requisitioned for siege work months ago.”

“They didn’t come for horses.”

“For the cows? They came for my *cows*?” Mehtma jumped up and strode out of the room, setting a quick pace through the crossing corridors down to the workshop and stable passage of the house. Vauti followed with the coffee tray, as if fearing her superior might explode without her morning cup. Of course Mehtma loved her coffee with cream, but what lit the deep fire in her was having to storm into the pungent stables only to find a half-dozen fully kitted Abzan warriors sequestering the two cows and yearling calf, and, beside them, a smug looking Jurjis. His armor was freshly polished, not a speck of grime on it; the ancestors’ eyes on his breastplate almost seemed to twinkle. *Why risk himself on the walls when he could be signing requisition forms in a tidy office?*

He waited with a gloating smile as she stormed up to him.

“Ah, Lieutenant Mehtma. It’s been a while. I haven’t seen you since, hm, when was it? When you tried to take my place as acting captain of logistics? Your temper never did endear you to anyone.”

“What are you doing with my cows?” Mehtma demanded.

Jurjis’s grin widened with petty triumph. “Why, by right of the authority granted to me by the council, I am requisitioning these unreported cows.”

“I have a permit to keep, house, and feed them, which I filed with the council last year when I returned from the khan’s court. The cows are a gift from the khan herself!”

“Is that so? I never saw such a permit, and there is none on file in the clerk’s office.”

“If there isn’t one, it’s because someone removed it.”

“That would be illegal.” His taunting smile broadened with challenge. Of course he was the one who could request—or deny—an investigation into any illegal pilfering of permits.

Mehtma would have punched him right then, and he knew it, but he was flanked by a half-dozen morose Abzan militia members, their armor scuffed and expressions grim from bearing the siege. Or maybe they resented the luxury of cows.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I have other business." He shoved past her.

She and Vauti climbed the wide underground ramp to the deeper parts of the city side by side. As solid a marvel of stone sculpting Qatros Karst, a grand haven born from humble refugee caves, the marks of the siege were visible even down here. She passed an emergency shelter festooned with cloth walls, an archway repaired with wood taken from a fruit orchard above that had been destroyed in a direct hit from a ballista, a stain of blood never fully washed out. Before the siege, the pillared hall had been home to stalls hawking all the bits and bobs of luxury: street food, coffee and tea, herbs and spices, ribbons, lush carpets, books of poetry and laments, desert-born crystals, and dragonstorm glass. Now, no stalls were allowed, by order of the captain of logistics. Every bit of supply and labor was run through Jurjis's office. Each empty stall may as well have been stamped with his smug face.



Art by: Volkan Baga

"Last night, Sultai necromancy reached all the way into the arena district," said Vauti. "Two killed, eleven afflicted."

"I didn't see that attack listed in this morning's report." Mehtma raised her head, looking up into the cracked and re-healed marble arches of the level. "Lack of information means frantic families and empty posts! Spirits are low. We're starving. How much longer can we hold out?"

Vauti only made a soft, sad noise. There were barely enough mages to protect the city from dragonstorms, much less the probing attacks of their enemies. The Sultai necromancers had brought both demands and poisonous spells. It always struck Mehtma as an odd thing to go to war over. The real sticking point was the Sultai's demand for mining rights, as the dragon-altered cliffs were abundant in jewels and salt. When she'd fought in the rebellion, the battle had been against Dromoka's monsters. Fighting for freedom had been righteous. Cleaner. Not hedged about with whispers, secrets, and greed.

The council hall lay straight ahead. A steady stream of people walked, limped, or were carried in and out of what had once been the beginnings of a university but was now a hospital. To the left, the entrance to the new marketplace was fenced off with rope and a sign declaring all trade was strictly supervised by the logistics division, led by that weasel Jurjis. People stood in orderly lines, awaiting help. As Mehtma approached the queue, the quiet murmuring was swallowed by a thunderous, shuddering crash so close that the floor vibrated and the walls trembled. Mehtma staggered to one knee. The glowing amber tracery that lit the walls blinked on and off as if the very magic that powered it had been damaged.

Mehtma ran to the door and flung it open to receive a faceful of dust and swirling grit. A huge stone had punched through into the clerk's room and smashed onto the trio of desks. All three clerks were dead, one scarcely more than a smear of blood and flesh where the artillery stone had made its initial impact. The clerk seated at the next desk had been pierced by multiple shards released as the rock shattered. The third sprawled with limbs outflung, unmarked. But when Mehtma knelt beside her to search for her pulse: the clerk was dead. A faint haze of fading magic suggested a spell had been affixed to the stone, extending its impact further.

Mehtma ran back to the door, pausing in the threshold to scan the great plaza. The old marketplace where refugees had been allowed to set up camp was painted with thick smears of dust, brightened by lances of sunlight spearing down from overhead in patches where the roof had collapsed. The barrage had punched right through the city's upper ceiling, finally negating the years of protective magic woven into it. People scurried, wailing, shouting for help; beams had crashed down; shelters toppled; abandoned market stalls upended where heavy hail had battered them.

Vauti and Mehtma ran toward the injured. Not ten steps in, a man clutching a broken arm against his chest stumbled in front of them. "I beg you, Lieutenant. People are trapped. Please help us."

She glanced back but saw no city guards, no logistics officers, crossing the plaza on their way to assist. Probably Jurjis didn't care about refugees. *Hadn't he argued that refugees shouldn't be admitted to the city at all because they were a drain on resources? What use were cows and decorum in the face of this assault?*

"Take us there," she said. The man led them along what had once been a market lane till they reached a corner market stall. Several people heaved at a huge beam pinning debris over the space.

"Who's trapped?" Mehtma asked, coming up.

One of the onlookers said three names, but the only name she caught was Gohl. *One of her students? Surely not.* "Stop pulling at the beam, you'll only damage the structure further. We need to lift it."

"If we take the time to lift it, they'll be dead," said one of the onlookers.

"Hush!" Mehtma knelt, examining how the beam had fallen and been driven into the ground. She gestured to the others. "If you aren't willing to assist Private Vauti, then move back. You and you, stand there. If we can haul this end up a hands-width, we can use a lever to hold it steady." Vauti was already hauling over a broken post. Rubble made a good enough fulcrum. She directed the onlookers to stop

their dawdling and find purchase. On her count, they lifted, and though it made a massive groan, the beam barely budged. She heaved with them, fighting the dust-induced cough. Her arms burned. But it was enough.

“Vauti! Now!”

The loxodon jammed the post inside, and even the injured man helped pry the massive beam up. It showered dust as it lifted. Mehtma dropped to her stomach, peering into the darkened stall. Dimly, she saw three forms inside. There was no time to waste. The beam precariously balanced above her, she shimmied in, stomach scraping along bits of household goods. The air was tight, stuffy, choked with grit. “Gohl! Do you hear me?”

One of the figures stirred. All youths, though she didn’t recognize two; one’s leg was at a bad angle.

“Sister Mehtma?”

“Can you crawl? Drag the others to me!”

Gohl seized the wrist of one of their companions and crawled forward. On a terrible, splintering groan, the beam shifted, offering a seam of light. Blood spattered Gohl’s cool-toned face, hopefully only a surface wound. Heads always bled. *How long could Vauti hold up the massive beam?* Mehtma rolled carefully into the pit and worked her way around. She got her arm around the other youth’s waist and pulled. It was difficult to get purchase, but she inched back toward the market.

Vauti gave a harsh trumpet, which meant she hadn’t much time left. She couldn’t look back. “Are you out, Gohl?”

“I’m free, but—”

A creak warned Mehtma; she made her decision. She hoisted the youth against her chest and heaved them both up past the rim and then shoved her way, helmet leading, with reckless bravado to finally spill out into the light on the other side of the beam and, in an undignified tangle of limbs, roll against the street. Vauti bugled, and the beam dropped with a heavy thud.

Gohl sat next to their friend, hand pressed to their horned forehead. The boy Mehtma carried seemed to be breathing.

“Will you live, Gohl?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Gohl said, their face pale but resolute.

“Good. Take charge of the others.”

As Mehtma got to her feet, brushing off her armor and testing her legs and arms to make sure she hadn’t strained or twisted anything, she caught sight of the absolute last thing she had ever expected to see in the old marketplace. Her cows, in the distance, passing through one of those spears of sunlight, being led by *Cemil*.

“Thank the ancestors you’re safe, sister.” Vauti came up beside her.

“My cows!” Mehtma waved her hand and shouted.

“What?” Startled, Vauti looked all around, but the cows, and Cemil, had vanished.

“Come on!”

Vauti did not argue, only followed as Mehtma broke forward at a run. Her knee twinged, but what did she care about that? *Why Cemil?*

They had to dodge around the milling, bewildered, frightened refugees, but clerics were finally beginning to arrive through the main archway. A quick glance back showed Mehtma no one in logistics uniforms. *Jurjis's people ought to have been first to arrive!*

"I see them!" said Vauti, having greater height. "They're headed toward the east gate!"

"That gate is closed."

Or ... the officers said it was closed. Mehtma broke into a run again once she and Vauti came free of the area damaged in the barrage. Deeper in the old marketplace, newer refugees cowered by the doorways of their shelters.

The lane grew darker as she approached the gate, with its double doors banded with iron and a pair of warded guard posts. She raced into the small plaza. The guard posts stood empty. *Had the militia run out to help?* They were never meant to leave their posts. At least the gate remained shut.

Or ... did it? A tingle of fresh air brushed her nose. One of the big doors sat ajar the tiniest bit, the opening difficult to make out with the lights damaged by the magical assault. With Vauti's aid, Mehtma tugged the door open and ran smack into a big, warm body.

By the markings—her cow! Startled, the cow swished her tail.

Mehtma lunged around the cow for the slender figure just ahead, got hold of his shoulder, and yanked him hard around. He staggered, stumbling out of her grasp. It was too dark to see more than a suggestion of a face, but his yelp and his posture told her it was definitely Cemil.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded. Neither in logistics nor in the militia, quiet, unassuming Cemil had no business with her cows. Vauti hustled up behind her.

Cemil dropped the cows' lead and bolted into the darkness, up the enclosed ramp, toward the outer gate. Past the gate lay the no-man's land—trampled fields, burned workshops—and beyond that the Sultai encampment.

"Take the cows home," she shot back to Vauti, then sprinted after Cemil.

As a youth in training, she'd clambered through every twist and turn of the bolt-holes and watch-posts and narrow guard passages inside the city's embankment. Cemil would have no choice but to climb through this maze to the top of the wall. Mehtma knew a quicker path. The inner guard posts guarded a steep staircase built into the rock that led up, all the way up to the top of the protecting ramparts. Mehtma climbed as fast as she could through the darkness, and when she reached the top, she shouldered open the hatch and scrambled out.

The rampart was about ten paces wide, dizzyingly high enough that a fall could kill. But no guards on the battlements. *Where had they gone?*

She swung to look back onto the open surface level where once the city's gardens, inner fields, workshops, and open-air temples had stood. It was still day, so she could see the abandoned ground strewn with craters, debris, splintered wood, and a few stubborn vortices of trapped necromancy that Abzan mages had fenced into nets of white magic. Farther away, spiky towers rose on the other side of the great encircling wall. The towers marked the position of Sultai siege engines. Everything lay still. She didn't trust the quiet.

A murky fog rose outside, tendrils swirling around the battlements as if probing for gaps, but the miasma came no higher: the thick fog would conceal anyone sneaking up to the outer gates from the outside—or sneaking away from the city.

The scrape of a boot on stone alerted her. Mehtma spun and threw up her arm. A crack from a blade hammered hard into her shoulder, but her armor absorbed most of the shock. She dropped to the ground just as Cemil twirled his blade back and around to cut at her from the other side. Kicking out her left foot, she caught him on the ankle. He tipped sideways, falling to a knee, swinging the blade wide to balance himself. A Sultai sickle, jade snake curling around its handle.

“You’ve never defeated me, cohort-brother,” said Mehtma. “What makes you think you can now?”

“You are no sibling of mine!” He sprang up and thrust at her torso with the point of the blade. It slid a hair’s breadth from her chest as she swayed back. He reversed direction swiftly, and the haft thumped into the center of her chest, sending her flying back into the battlements. Cemil lunged again, and Mehtma barely dodged out of the way. His blade clanged against stone. This time, she was ready. She moved inside his range and grabbed both his wrists, tightening her grip until he grunted with pain. She yanked him closer.

“What are you doing with my cows? Why is the eastern gate deserted?”

He tried to shake her off, but she was furious now, her rage fueling her strength. She swept a foot against the back of his knee, brought him sprawling down, and wrenched the blade out of his hands.

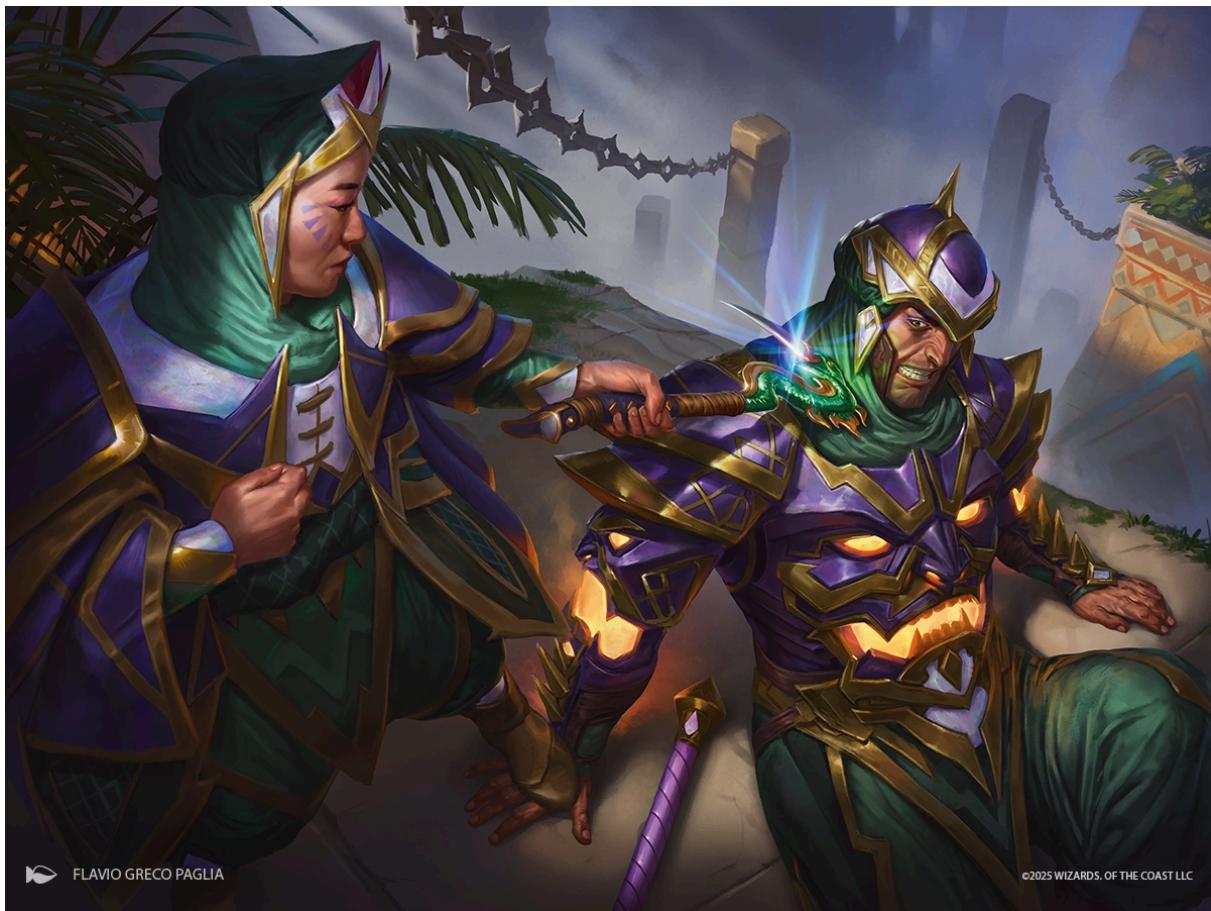
She dropped down, knee on his chest. “Answer me, Cemil Mevak!”

Through gritted teeth, he said, “You may believe Abzan loves the children it tears away from their homes. But they scorn us. They scorn you. They will never see krumar as truly Abzan!”

“No! The ancestors speak to us!”

“Why do you think they never appointed you captain of logistics? Everyone knows you are more competent than Jurjis. That you won accolades from the khan herself! Yet he got the position. Not you, Mehtma. Never those of us who come from outside!”

She shook her head, but a chill spread through her flesh. “No. You and I aren’t the enemy, Cemil, whatever anyone has told you. The Sultai are feeding you poison.”



Art by: Flavio Greco Paglia

Cemil rolled sideways, and Mehtma had relaxed just enough—too much!—that she couldn’t stop him from throwing her off. Her back hit the ground hard, knocking the breath out of her, and the blade spun along the rampart with a hiss of metal scraping stone, sparks spitting. In the time it took her to scramble back up, he had jumped atop the battlements.

She grabbed at his arm, hand closing over his wrist. “What are you *doing*?”

“I’m going home,” he said. “As I’ve been working to do for years. None have fed me poison! I’ve made my own path! This is the deal I made with Jurjis. He set up the meeting, and all I had to do was make you chase your precious cows around the city!”

Tendrils of fog coiled up from below her like limbs: Sultai magic, sinuous and alluring. “Cemil, Jurjis only wants to weaken us. You *are* House Mevak, just as I am!”

“I was never House Mevak,” he said. “I am Sultai.” He flung himself backward off the battlements, hauling her with him to drag her down into his fate.

Her belly slammed into the stone wall, knocking the wind out of her, a sharp halt, but his grip was iron. His weight pulled her, yanking her shoulders and torso far over the battlement until the blood rushed to her head, pulsing and burning. Cold mist stung her face. She clawed at his fingers, hammered at them with her free hand, gouged at them with the edge of her gauntlets. With a wordless grunt—a hopeless laugh or a giddy cry, she could not tell—he let go of her wrist and fell into the mist.

There was no hard thump of impact, as if the fog had woven a net to secure him.

She heaved herself back over the ramparts. Her body ached; the cut on her shoulder stung, blood trickling; her boots stubbed up against the sickle he had dropped, and she grabbed it, hoisted it, examined its oil-slick blade, catching her breath as at last she could think again.

Maybe Cemil was dead, or maybe the Sultai scouts would find him wounded but alive. Or perhaps he was useful to the necromancers in death as well. *And then what? Would they accept him back into the fold as he was, with nothing?*

But Jurjis had only given him the cows to distract her. *From what?*

No. She knew. Her heart congealed as with venom. House Agach wanted a Kin-Tree of their own, but they had been denied. It could be years, generations, before they were granted one of their own. And no one could get into the heart chamber of a house, the abode of its precious Kin-Tree, without the secret passphrase.

Which Cemil, assistant to the warden, had. The betrayal was unthinkable.

She ran to the inner stairs, pounded down them to find a pair of puzzled militiamen examining the guard posts and the deserted tunnel.

“Are you the one on guard?” one called to her. “Who abandoned their post?”

“Ask Captain Jurjis! He’s in charge!” she shouted. She waved at Vauti, who had the cows under control, and after Vauti acknowledged her with a waggle of their trunk, Mehtma ran faster than she had ever run in her life.

A buzz of distant noise drifted through House Mevak’s empty tunnels. She retraced her steps down the oldest tunnels, deep into the heart of the mountain she raced, to the deepest end, a place no one went unless they meant to tend the Kin-Tree or spend an hour in contemplation beneath its fragile canopy.

The sanctum door stood open. Mehtma crept the last few steps as soundlessly as she could. She looked first for the tree. It stood, just as she had seen it earlier today. The warden was still absent. Poisoned? Called to aid in the siege? An armored man wearing the face of another house knelt next to a prone body, a heavy knife in his hand.

The body was young Enti, the little loxodon who always had a question. Blood stained Enti’s jewel-toned robes.

Mehtma still held Cemil’s sickle, its slim grip and perfect balance a reminder that the young man she had grown up with had betrayed her beloved house. Just as Jurjis had betrayed everything that Abzan, the Kin-Trees, and the House Mevak ancestors stood for.

A surge of rage impelled her. She sprinted across the gap, raising the sickle. The intruder glanced over his shoulder, then sprang to his feet and deftly dodged away as she swung.

She had to jump so as not to stumble on Enti’s limp body. She spun in the air, landing on both feet, knees bending to steady herself, to face Jurjis.

“How can you do it? Even you!” she spat. “You would kill a Kin-Tree for your own selfish gain!”

“Your khan-favored house can get another cutting,” he said, no doubt words he had practiced on lonely Cemil. “But my house has been refused a Kin-Tree for too long. We are worthy. So, I’m simply taking matters into my own hands.”

Mehtma edged sideways, toward the softly glowing tree. *Was it brighter than it had been this morning? Were there golden traceries in its silver bark that hadn’t been there before?* Or was she tired and enraged, seeing things?

“You are no Abzan to speak of being worthy in the same breath that you speak of mutilating a Kin-Tree for your own selfish benefit!”

“You are the one who is no true Abzan,” he snarled back. “I was born in Great Arashin! You krumar were forced on us by the dragon-tyrant Dromoka.”

“I am as Abzan as you are.”

He barked out a contemptuous laugh. “For all you have accomplished, what do you have to show for it, Mehtma? The fickle young khan showers medals and ribbons on those who flatter her, that’s all. But the council of Qatros Karst doesn’t even trust you with a military assignment.”

Jurjis leaped, covering the gap in a single bound before she had time to parry. He slammed into Mehtma, and a hot pain bloomed in her shoulder, the same place where Cemil had sliced open her armor. She fell back, Jurjis looming over her to strike again, his face red and his expression livid.

She thrust with her heels, rolling back and sideways. The knife’s heavy blade thunked into the solid floor, a bright spark arcing from the point where it skidded over the rock. But he recovered and kept coming, and she scrambled back like a crab, fending his strikes off with Cemil’s blade. There wasn’t time to get her feet under her, to really hit back. All she could do was retreat. Her shoulder throbbed. Blood oozed in bright red trails down the smooth surface of her chest plate.

Jurjis stalked after her, smiling grimly as he unhooked from his belt a gleaming axe. Mehtma pushed herself up against the slender trunk—it was no greater than her own torso, not like the sturdy Kin-Tree of old, before the tyrant Dromoka had sundered them. His axe could dig so deep a blow into its wood that a single stroke would kill it.

“I was only going to take a cutting, but now I’ll let you see me chop it down,” he said in a low growl as he stomped onto the dirt, axe raised.

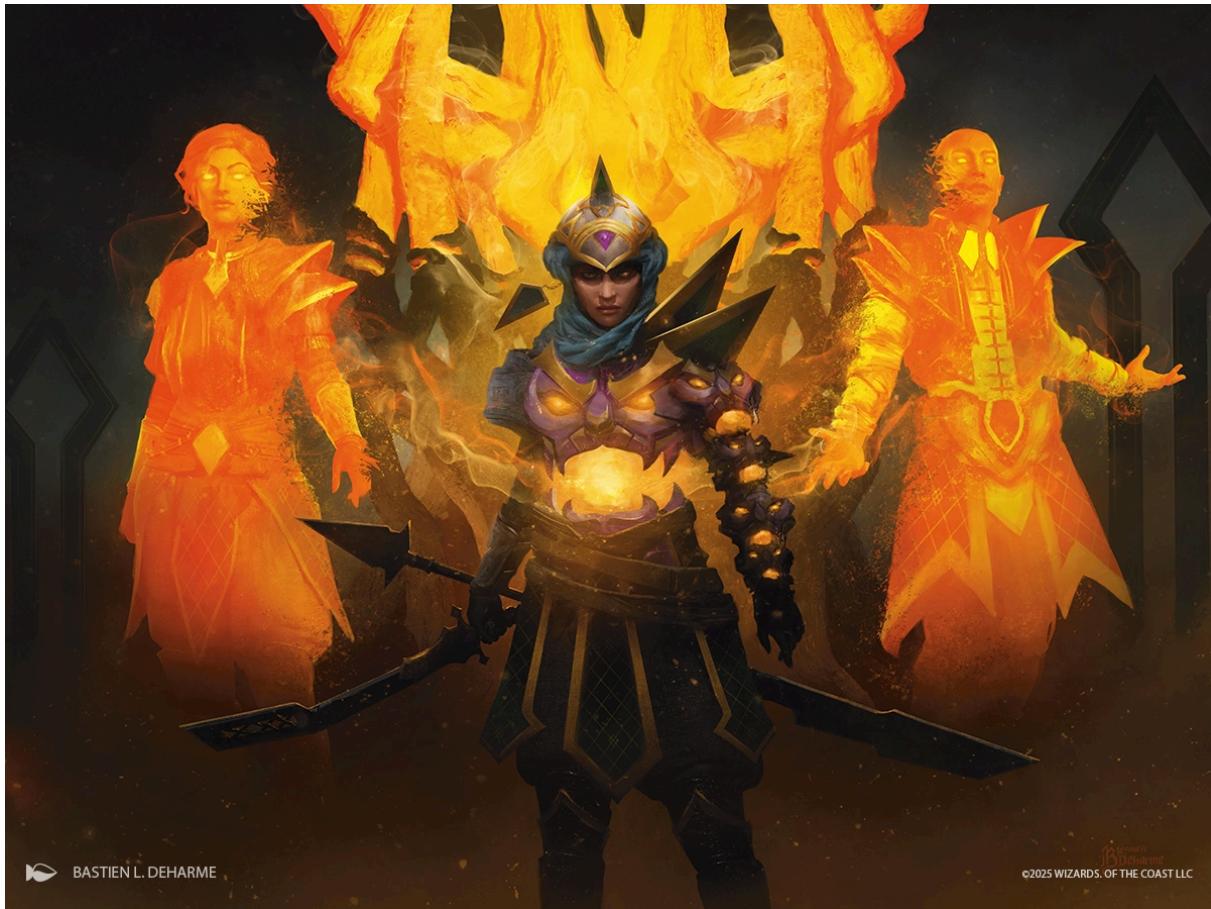
Back against the trunk, she pushed herself up to her feet. Dizziness swept over her from pain and blood loss. It hurt to raise the blade, but she gritted her teeth and thrust at Jurjis abruptly. Anything to drive him back. He skipped sideways, and she saw her mistake. Now, he had a clean angle with which to swing without having to cleave through her body first.

A buzzing filled her head. Her gaze turned hazy as she tried to focus. *Was she about to faint?* The amber light from the chamber walls dimmed, but the canopy brightened. A golden petal drifted down in front of her eyes like a hallucination.

Jurjis said something sharp and loud, lunging forward. Mehtma found her footing; she flipped the underside of the blade up to catch against the axe’s shaft. Jurjis cursed, bearing down with all his strength to try to topple her to one side, to get in his blow, to strike the tree. Her knees buckled, her back pressing hard against the trunk. Her shoulder was going numb. She couldn’t feel her fingers on that hand.

A flash of gold spun before her eyes. A falling petal brushed her cheek as the trunk of the Kin-Tree began to glow with a new and stronger light.

“Daughter of House Mevak, we grant you strength,” said a voice, not on the air, but felt through her flesh. “Hear me, Mehtma. I fight beside you, my worthy sister.”



Art by: Bastien L. Deharme

A glowing gold figure stepped out of the tree, a loxodon in gleaming armor, her form shimmering as light spread through spirit-leaves; she was small but with a determined elegance that had only begun to blossom in her life. Her voice was that of wind through branches. Her implacable gaze caused Jurjis to cry out loud in astonishment and take a step back, staring.

“Enti,” whispered Mehtma. Though she was wounded sorely, weak from blood loss, a new strength flooded her. She gripped the sickle tightly and advanced with grim purpose.

This time, Jurjis retreated one step, then a second, then onto the rock floor. Mehtma dashed forward with a shout. She cut and parried and relentlessly pushed him back across the chamber until his legs rammed into a bench against the wall. He was trapped.

“You can’t kill me!” he gasped. “I am an officer of the city, appointed by the council!”

“You are a traitor to everything the Abzan stands for,” she said, and this time, when she thrust and he parried desperately with his axe, she swayed sideways, past his guard, and drove the point of the blade into his belly, sure and true.

He grunted in shock, folded forward, and hung there for moments as his mouth worked but no sound came out. *The blade was sharp and deadly, a traitor’s weapon fit to end a traitor’s life*, she thought. She wrenched it out and thrust again, into his chest. He gurgled.

She yanked out the blade. Jurjis collapsed face down, dead. She dropped the Sultai sickle on his body and stood there, staring at the tree, hands numb, thoughts blank.

Enti's presence had vanished, her stilled body crumpled across the roots. Within the canopy, a single bud had opened into a delicate sun-bright flower.

Mehtma met Vauti and an anxious bureaucrat, Councilor Dvujin, at the late Captain Jurjis's office. It had been a day and a night since her battle with the traitor, and her wound, while improved, was far from healed; she still moved stiffly. When she swung open the door, magic lit the walls to reveal an austere room with a single desk and shelves lining the walls. The shelves were filled with boxes and bags, each one labeled with a tag. Several ledgers rested on the desk. She opened a ledger to find lists of requisitioned items. Another contained a list of over a hundred deceased, labeled by importance; refugees were only counted in number, not by name. The third ledger was a record of letters and messages brought to the logistics office as well as those marked for the court. She paged forward and, sure enough, found a record of her first letter to the khan dated thirty days after the siege's beginning. By her name was written a number.

She walked along the shelves until she found a box corresponding with the number. It unlocked easily. Inside lay bundles of letters. She returned to set it on the desk. "These were never sent. Neither were the council's damage reports. I think you may find that the office requisitions have gone into the coffers of House Agach or Jurjis's own pockets. Or to the Sultai in exchange for Jurjis letting the siege drag on."

Dvujin sputtered, "But the khan has said—"

"To fight until we are all starving? I expect a true report has never reached her. Not of our situation, nor of our casualties. But, Councilor, none of this carelessness need come out if you will let me rectify the situation."

Dvujin looked up with a glimmer of steely interest. "What can you possibly mean, Lieutenant? Are you blackmailing me?"

"Not at all," said Mehtma smoothly. "I'm telling you that I'll do everything in my power to serve Qatros Karst and the khan. Appoint me captain of logistics, and I'll make Jurjis's corruption and collusion with the Sultai—and your ignorance of it—disappear as though it never happened. And I promise you, the khan will know of our desperation so she can send a relief force to drive away the Sultai besiegers." Without waiting for reply, Mehtma walked out, looking weary.

"Astounding," said Vauti, following her. "Now, will you please return to the hospital?"

Within the hour, healers were once again fussing at her, removing her armor, dressing her wounds. When the last of the healers departed, Vauti entered carrying a tray with quills and paper, as well as a platter of small dishes—not that she was hungry—and a covered cup. The loxodon set down the cup and uncovered it to reveal the lovely aroma of coffee, the dark liquid lightened by a hefty measure of cream. "As you requested, Captain."

Mehtma took a long, grateful swallow.