

Last Day

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From set *Dragon's Maze*

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Hearth Fountain Academic was one of the most exclusive schools in Ravnica, respected for the breadth and quality of its curriculum, and unique in that it was tuition-free. Scholarships were available to all children, of any species or station, and awarded to only the brightest minds of each generation. HFA wasn't a prep school for the guilds; acclaim was earned with hard work, not zealotry, and if students weren't dedicated, they didn't last.

But this was the Last Day before summer break and, as usual, the kids got a little crazy.

Liric sat on a stone bench at the edge of the school's sculpture garden and watched as hundreds of children danced around the Hearth Fountain while it exploded with light. Most of the them wore homemade guild costumes, and the lower grades dumped colored glammers into the massive basin while the seniors shouted orders. It was his fifth year as an instructor at HFA, and this field day was as poignant as the first. No, even more so. For a single beat, his heart knifed sideways in his chest; if tonight didn't go as planned, he wouldn't be returning next year.

"Professor L! Professor L!" Liric took a deep breath and then turned. "Professor L! I have something for you; I wanted to give you this!" It was Skrygix, a goblin from his honors history class. She was running, towing her little brother with her left hand, clutching a rolled up sheet of paper in her right.

Her brother was dressed as an Azorius Hussar and his painted pressboard helmet hung over his eyes. He was picking his nose. "I wan' to go to da fountain!" He pushed the helmet back.

"Okay, go play." Skrygix let him go, and he stamped off into the crowd. She called after him, "Don't get wet!" She wore a white dress with a black frock painted across the neckline, but the exclamation point was her shock of orange hair moussed up into the shape of an Orzhov aristocrat's headdress.

"I made this for you!" She punched her arm out straight and offered Liric the scroll. He took it, then unrolled it with a teacher's practiced care. It was a painting of his classroom, but with the ceiling ridiculously high, and Liric himself depicted as a bespectacled Gruul giant, crouching to fit and pointing at the board with a stick of chalk the size of a log. Liric laughed.

Skrygix smirked, but quickly looked away as Liric re-rolled the painting.

"Thank you, Skrygix, it's a good likeness. I'll have it framed, then hang it in my office here at school." He opened his bag and placed the painting inside, careful to stow it in one of the rigid compartments so that it would not bend.

"What are you doing on your break, Professor L?"

"I'll be gone for a day or two, then back here for the rest of summer. Gardening as much as I can before it gets too hot, then preparing next year's lesson plan. Nothing exciting."

"Where are you going?"

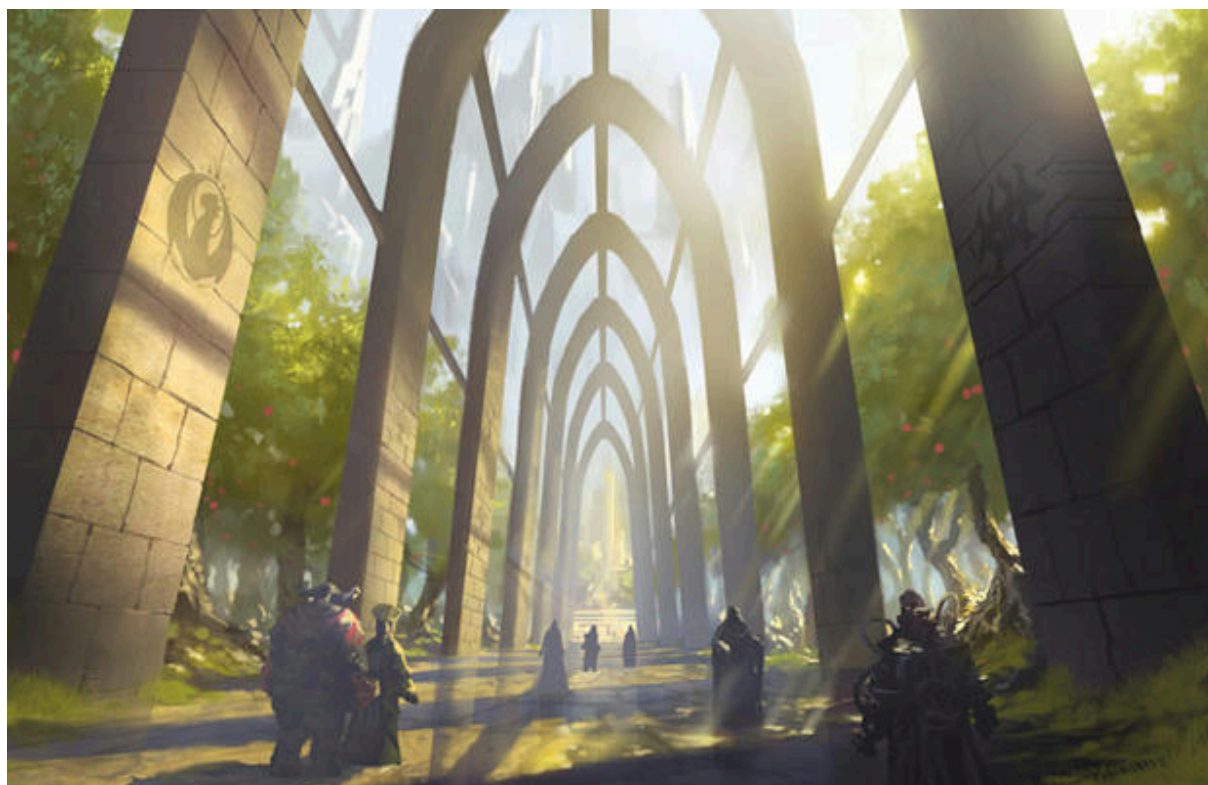
"Hmm?"

"You said you would be gone for a couple of days." Skrygix tilted her head and studied him openly. She was tall for a goblin, tall for her age.

Liric flipped his bag closed and felt the metal catches crawl toward each other, then seal with an inaudible click. Izzet manufactured, the bag shrank its chambers and pockets around their contents and tightened across his back when jostled. It was the second-most-expensive thing he owned. Liric stood and patted Skrygix on her shoulder.

"Happy Last Day, Skrygix. Have a fun summer."

Hours later, Liric watched the sunset from the buckle of a zeppelid as it descended into the Ismeri precinct. Most of the beast's passengers stood with him at the western rail, and for a moment he imagined they saw as one: all of Ravnica's evenings beginning, drawn up like a blanket at their feet.



After they anchored, Liric took his time walking the promenade. The storefronts shuttered their windows, lamps were lit, and the night traffic seeped into the streets. He had grown up here in Ismeri, and while the facades had changed, it felt more familiar than ever before. Outside a dance hall, two Rakdos bouncers compared tattoos while a dumpling vendor parked his cart. A few blocks later, a trio of toughs taunted a moa until it reared, butted one with its bronze champron, and knocked him off his feet. At the corner of 12th and Veil, Liric stopped and turned slowly in a circle. He had first kissed a girl here, Mareena, whose broad mouth and large eyes recalled something froggy, but the memory was still warm, radiant. He felt giddy. He was home.

Liric found a public bathroom and changed. His cardigan with HFA emblem went into the Izzet bag, and his gatecloak came out. In the mirror, Liric admired himself and counted backwards from eleven. When he reached zero, his reflection faded until it was nearly transparent.

On the street, the action had crested into a comfortable level of chaos, and Liric entered a building that an observer might think he chose at random. He'd never been to this exact location before, but seen from the outside, it was identical to every other operations house he'd worked from. That is, it didn't look like anything special at all. The outer door was unlocked, and when he was inside the vestibule, Liric put his hands in the pockets of his gatecloak.

His strand was there. It was a shoelace, or a ribbon, or a length of twine. The closer you looked, the more ordinary it seemed, until you stopped seeing it at all. He wound it around his wrist, and with his index finger, he traced the sign of inclusion on the inside door. The doorknob disappeared, and it opened from the opposite side.

He walked through the tenement's breakfast nook and stopped in the kitchen. To the empty room he said, "I'm here now. Where is my welcome?"

The air got brittle, and from a hidden cubby above the cabinets, an oculus appeared. It climbed down and balanced on the dishrack before hopping to the table.



This was it. All of the nights spent agonizing over his plan, the tension and anxiety of the past days, everything would play out now. Liric leaned forward. The creature put its hands on his shoulders and then stared at him. It smelled salty.

As if it had always been there, the memory warden's voice whispered up through the tiled floor and into the room, a collection of saved-up kitchen noise arranged as a question.

"Have you brought a puzzle?"

"No," Liric answered, "I didn't." Dark magics prickled on his skin, and his strand buzzed, squirmed against his palm like a living thing, shielding him from the warden's probe. He suppressed the urge to shiver.

"And why not?" The question was drawn out, a rattling of plates in the cupboard, the "not" a sound like a baby tooth dropped into a cup. Liric straightened and the oculus settled back, perched on its hind legs.

"The puzzle's done. I solved it."

There was a terrifying pause before the warden laughed, soullessly. "Have it your way, agent."

Relief washed over him: he hadn't been recognized. In the corner, where there had been a broom, there was now a narrow flight of stairs, leading down.

At the bottom, the Dimir interpreter sat with his back to the door, manipulating the wall of sand. Built from an uncountable number of memories, the wall recalled past events from all the perspectives it contained. Liric felt tingly and detached, as he always did in the wall's presence. Some essential part of him was suddenly missing. He was a doll, in a world of dolls, performing a mechanical pantomime of life. *These memories aren't mine*, Liric told himself. Yet still, looking into the dollhouse through the wall of sand, was the interpreter.

Liric cleared his throat. The hands that drew endless patterns and sigils in the sand slowed, dropped, and then spun his chair. He was smaller than Liric remembered—not just thinner, but shrunken. The interpreter's eyes slowly focused, then widened in surprise.

"Liric? Has it been so long? How did you..." The interpreter trailed off, stumbled when he stood. They embraced, awkwardly.

"Hi Dad," Liric said. "It has been a long time."

The last time he'd seen his father outside of an operations house was when Liric had been elevated to Dimir remainder. The ceremony had taken place in a Duskmantle atrium with only his father and a guildmage present. The mage had passed a coin stamped with Lazav's likeness over Liric's strand and sealed it end to end. A symbol of the voided circle. Only agents of the highest order could use a strand transformed in this fashion; it was a talent that couldn't be taught. His father had wept with pride, overwhelmed in knowing his son would never toil like a bookkeeper in the bowels of the undercity. Liric could walk the face of Ravnica unseen, mold the city's future as the Dimir directed, and no one would ever know who he was.

But not after tonight. Seven days earlier, Liric had found the mage who performed his remainder, the only person besides his father who could possibly remember him. Liric had left the man blanked, slumped against a column in the Dinrova.

Liric smiled with genuine affection and said, gently, "Why don't you show me what you've been working on, Dad?"

"What? Huh, yes of course!" His father faced the wall again and drew out its memories. "The guilds are poised to run the Implicit Maze. We've harvested as much as we could without arousing... ah. Look here!" In the sand, an image seen through a distant arch: Niv-Mizzet, studying a model of Ravnica. The wall shifted, became an Izzet mage Liric recognized as Ral Zarek, laughing while an elemental pawed at the ruins of a collapsed building.

"Lazav believes there is a prize the Dimir must have." His father was excited in a way that only the wall made him. "But then there's something different here. This one, he's important too, but I haven't seen how..." A hooded figure in blue, with a confused look that was all too familiar. Liric took a step toward his father, drew his strand out between both hands, and closed his eyes.

How many minds had he stolen from, had he vanished their most private intelligences only to dump them into walls just like this one?

At first, it had made such a grotesque sort of sense. Ravnica's collective conscience was putty that he could roll flat and mold into any shape he chose. He'd been in love with the idea, the dark anonymity, the sense that he was something other, but that was over. His father would be the last, absolutely the last, and tomorrow, he would no longer be Dimir.

It was such a delicately simple thing. Liric passed the strand slowly under his thumb and a series of glyphs popped out, one by one. The scenes running through the wall trembled and swept away. His father's hands were at his sides again. He turned around and frowned.

"I'm sorry agent... I've forgotten your name. Did you come to make a deposit?"

Liric blinked several times before he was able to speak. "We've made the deposit already. I have to leave now, I'm in a rush."

The interpreter nodded, opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again when no words came. He shrugged, and sat again before the wall of sand.

Back on the street, Liric made his way toward the library then ducked into an alley. This part of the precinct was largely untraveled at night. He pulled his strand from his pocket and glanced over his shoulder, overcome with the sudden fear that he'd been followed. There was no one there.



He held it before his eyes and he plucked out the beads, watched them flare and vanish until what was in his hands looked like thread. Maybe it had unwoven from a snag in his shirt. He was just a school-teacher now. He couldn't afford expensive clothing. When he returned to Hearth Fountain Academic, he'd bury it in the garden, cover it with a stone, and plant a fern on top.

And he would hang the caricature Skrygix had painted of him on the wall of his classroom.