

Hard as Anger, Bright as Joy

Langley Hyde

From set *Phyrexia: All Will Be One*

When Lukka stepped from the Blind Eternities, humidity and heat punched him in the gut. The green light lingering in the murky canopy, the rank taste of rotten flesh on the air, the metallic screeches of unseen beasts, the squelch underfoot of the sodden sphagnum—all these details told him he hadn't arrived in the correct location.



Art by: Alayna Danner

“For the life of every plane, we will keep watch.” How could he do that from here?

He wasn't with the rest of the strike team. This wasn't the rendezvous location. The Phyrexians must've employed a new defense against the incoming Planeswalkers—they were one step ahead, yet again. He should've known that Jace and the others couldn't be trusted to get a military operation right. When the telepath had tracked him down, Lukka had been expecting an attack because of what he'd done on Ikorra and at Strixhaven. He'd been surprised when Jace had recruited him, arguing that Lukka's military expertise would be essential to the success of their infiltration mission. Lukka had been reluctant. Initially. But when Jace had told him Phyrexia threatened Ikorra, he couldn't stand by. He still cared too much about his home for that.

“So here I am,” he murmured to himself, looking around. “Wherever that is.”

Irritated, Lukka kicked a sodden lump of turf. It splattered across a nearby tree. The ground was riddled with water-swollen potholes and thick roots—practically impassable. Pulsing veins transported black oil through the dense undergrowth and small suckers protruded from the tree trunks, branches sprouting toward sunlight. He craned his head. The networks of branches above looked walkable.

Overabundant trees putrid, mechanized vegetation? It had to be that place they'd mentioned—the Hunter Maze?

He considered, briefly, trying to planeswalk back. But given that he'd arrived here unexpectedly, there was no guarantee that he'd end up where intended. He might land in an even worse situation. No, he'd go high, try to make it back to the others.

If I find a creature I can take and dominate, I'll be able to chart my route toward Elesh Norn's stronghold. He might still have time to make the rendezvous and get back on mission.

He approached the tree trunk. Hand-like leaves curled into fists, cowering from him.

He removed his harpoon from the sheath on his left arm. He aimed, slung it upward. The harpoon caught on a branch overhead. The tree quivered, oozing reddish mucus from the wounds. Lukka tugged on the rope to make sure it was secure and braced his feet in grooves on the trunk. He levered himself upward and began to climb.

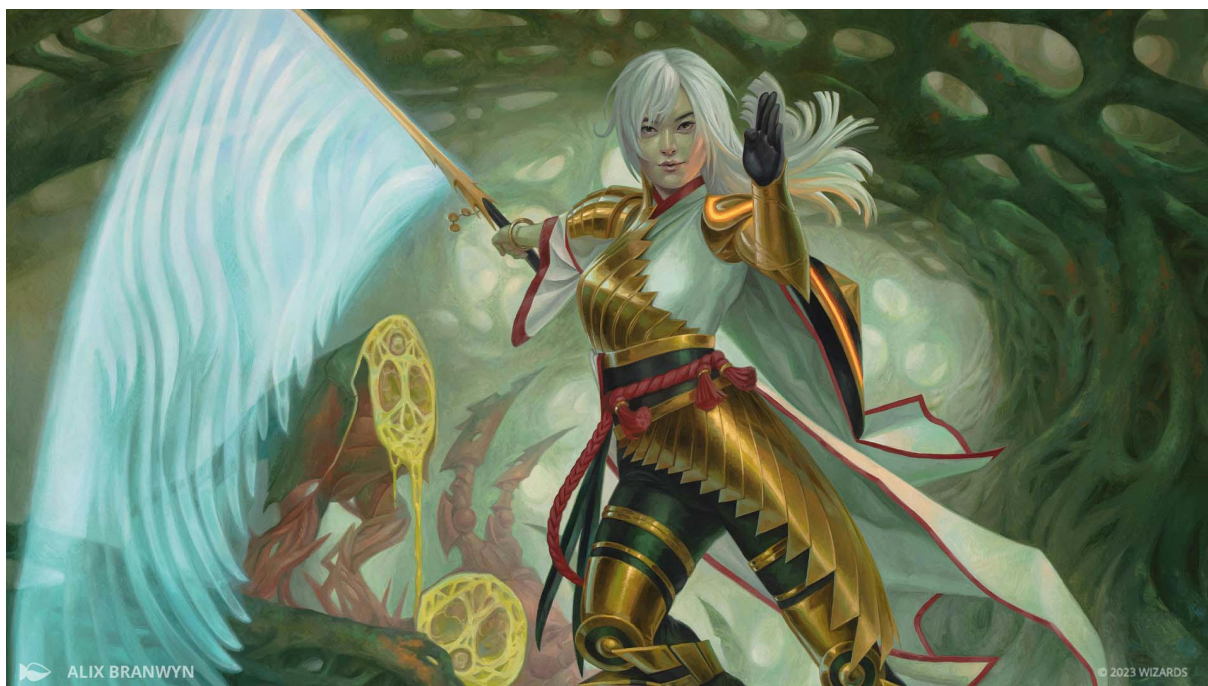
It wasn't much different from scaling the cliffs back home. Whatever others said, New Phyrexia was just another plane.

An angry cry pierced the air, startling a flock of creatures from their nest in the tree's hollow. The creatures flapped, chaotic and panicked, their toothed beaks glistening silver and their wings the wet color of raw liver. The creatures wheeled—toward the source of the cry.

Lukka cursed. His body, already exhausted from the long climb, shook as he hesitated in place. His hands ached with forming blisters. But he couldn't leave anyone to fight alone in this place. Besides, this might be his opportunity to dominate the local wildlife.

Clenching his thighs around the tree, he removed the harpoon from the bough, untangled the rope, and stowed it away. Then he dropped down onto the platform below. The circling flying creatures gave him a hint as to direction, and he headed that way at a jog, leaping from bough to bough. Excitement flushed the fatigue from his body, turning his tremble into strength and preparing him for the upcoming battle.

On a broad bough, a willowy elf, swinging what looked like a wooden sword, fought alongside a woman dressed in white and gold whose long sword flowed like water. Lukka had seen them before: Nissa, and the woman was called the Wanderer.



Art by: Alix Branwyn

A twisted construct that seemed to blend the worst parts of machine and organism attacked them. Its four legs were fused together at awkward angles, yet the Phyrexian had a lethal grace. The Wanderer, a quick blur of white garb and flashing sword, harried the Phyrexian hulk back to give Nissa some room to spellcast. Nissa's tattoos glowed a faint green. Her green cloak aswirl around her, she channeled a spell. Metallic leaves quivered, then were plucked from the tree as if by an invisible hand. The leaves whirled in the air and then descended in a tornado at the abomination. The sharp metal edges shredded the creature. Gray-green blood sprayed.

But the two women hadn't seen the second beast, creeping above them along a branch, ready to pounce.

Lukka reached out with the eludha, the bond he could forge between himself and another creature. He could feel the beast's mind, metallic-bright with pulpy, underused biological elements. He grabbed it and squeezed. Lukka could almost taste blood in his mouth, the tang of iron thick on his tongue. The Phyrexian froze, unable to proceed further. He could feel it rebel against his hold, a thrashing struggle inside his skull.

Nissa and the Wanderer pressed their advantage against their wounded centaur hulk, forward along the bough. It fell, its body draping over the bough and causing the entire tree to shudder. The Wanderer leaped atop its back, bringing her sword down to decapitate the beast. Then, with a strange flicker of light, the Wanderer vanished.

Did she planeswalk away? If so, the timing seemed odd.

Nissa strode forward. She kicked the centaur hulk. It slid from the bough and started its crashing descent to the forest floor below. She cleaned her blade on her cloak and sheathed it.

"Don't get too comfortable." Lukka strode toward her. "I subdued a second looking to ambush you from above."

"Thanks." Nissa turned. Her expression changed. "Lukka."

Lukka nodded up at the centaur hulk above them. It eased itself from the higher bough onto their platform, gentle enough that the branch underfoot did not even bob. "It intended to strip the meat from your bones."

"I don't know how we even ended up here," Nissa said.

"I plan on finding the surface," Lukka said. "Once we're higher we'll be able to get our bearings and plot a route to Elesh Norn's stronghold."

"And how do you plan on navigating this maze?"

Lukka nodded at the Phyrexian monstrosity. It had given into him utterly. He should've known that dominating a half-mechanical creature would be easy. It didn't have the same survival instinct or sense of self that an animal would. It was a mere construct.

"You're bonded with it?" Nissa asked.

She didn't seem happy that he'd saved her life. She eyed him with distrust and concern. He knew this look. He hated it. He'd gotten that look the first time he'd ever bonded with a monster. "It can guide and protect us until we reach the top."

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to bond with a Phyrexian," Nissa said, flatly. "Let's destroy it."

"I've fought monsters my entire life." Now frustrated, Lukka turned away from her. "I can handle it."

Nissa didn't say a word, which was telling enough.

"I promise you," Lukka said, "if I get so much as a stomachache, I'll end the creature."

Nissa stared at him, uncertainly, then she looked around herself at the Hunter Maze. He imagined she was gauging her ability to survive alone, without him, and finding herself lacking. Finally, she sighed.

"I don't like this," Nissa said.

"I am good for my word," he said, irritated.

Nissa nodded. "Let's find the best route out of here."

Lukka plunged his mind into the centaur hulk's consciousness. Its thoughts were jumbled, hard and bright with anger, thick and slimy with shrewdness. He sensed the shape of the thing's territory and frequently traveled paths.

"Ah," he said, with a sigh of soul-deep satisfaction. "We go up, of course."

Nissa seemed annoyed. "I could have told you that."

"Up" was easier said than done in the Hunter Maze. First, to get to a scalable "tree," Lukka and Nissa had to cross a cavernous gap between the monolithic boughs. Luckily, and as Lukka had expected, the Phyrexian became useful.

First, he forced it to stretch its massive body between the gaps in the branches. He and Nissa walked across the centaur hulk like a bridge. He could feel its flesh shift beneath his feet as it breathed. Nissa's feet felt like a sharp little patter along its spine. Did she *want* him to feel her boots digging in?

When they reached the clearest route up—a limbless tree with few hiding spaces for ambush predators—Lukka boarded the centaur hulk. He extended his hand to Nissa. She ignored it and scrambled into place, clenching her legs around the centaur hulk's body like it was a horse. It irritated him. Even the smell of her, lemon-bright, bothered him. What, had she washed her long dark hair in citrus water as a preparation for battle?

But one did not choose their allies. He could follow orders and stay on mission, like any good soldier, and respect the bond that came from fighting alongside an ally.

With a flick of his mind, he urged the centaur hulk up the tree. He hardly even needed to guide it. It leaped upward in jumps, the extra joints in its limbs giving it a rocking, lurching motion. He couldn't brace himself against it. Nor could he move with it.

Nissa seemed uncomfortable.

He craned his head, glimpsing a gap between the boughs with his doubled vision, half his own and half the Phyrexian's. "Brace yourself."

"Braced."

The Phyrexian centaur hulk jumped. Freefall's momentary freedom plunged through Lukka, and they all lurched forward together as it landed. The impact rattled up Lukka's spine.

The centaur hulk swung forward to a platform that jutted from an otherwise limbless tree. The platform looked like a metal-bracket fungus, coated with glowing patches of green, lichen-like lamina.

The centaur hulk plunged its razor-sharp forelimbs into the tree and began its ascent. Lukka leaned forward, pressing his center of gravity close to the centaur hulk's back. He could feel every part of the beast straining as it climbed, its organic heart pounding with fervor, its metallic joints creaking from Lukka and Nissa's combined weight. Nissa clung to Lukka, her thin arm looped around his waist, her cheek to his back.

It was only her feet, he decided, that bothered him: her pointed heels dug into the centaur hulk's body, and he could feel their echo on his own ribs.

He hadn't always been as tall, as strong, as he was now. Once, before he'd hit his growth in adolescence, a group of older boys had cornered him. Already he'd known he was different, though he hadn't understood how. On some level, the other boys had sensed it: an invisible barrier that prevented him from being one of them. They'd cornered him. Five to one. He'd decided to retreat, but they'd tripped him. He'd had to choose while curled up against the blows raining down: head or ribs? He'd wrapped his arms over his skull, and he'd endured.

He'd shown them later, of course. They'd regretted it.

He wanted Nissa to stop. Stop digging her heels in. *Stop.*

He knew she had to hold on. Of course, she did. They weren't his ribs. He said nothing.

The Hunter Maze seemed to murmur around him as if an invisible wind stirred its boughs. But no breath of air troubled the hairs along the nape of his neck. Spores drifted down, glowing green in swirling motes.

Small eyeballs, bulging like knots in the wood, rolled themselves open to watch Lukka and Nissa pass. Fern-like foliage unfurled its blades as if longing for his blood. Small metallic crab-like creatures scuttled between oily pools. He could feel its interconnectedness, the Phyrexians that ambulated through, connected to the Hunter Maze with metallic vines. Now, that would be something, wouldn't it, to dominate an entire ecosystem

Imagine the power . . .

A flash of white light.

"Watch out!" the Wanderer shouted. She'd blinked into existence on a tree across from them and now clung to its girth in a bear hug to keep herself from falling.

Lukka searched for the danger.

Leathery wings snapped open near his head. A Phyrexian monstrosity swooped downward, reaching toward Nissa's face with its oil-dripping claws. Nissa gripped him hard with one arm and reached for her sword with her free hand. Lukka tried to twist, to fend the creature off, but it was directly behind him. He couldn't hold onto the hulk and fight at the same time.

The monstrosity swung around, attacking the arm that Nissa gripped him with, ripping at her hand so that she couldn't draw her blade.



Art by: Lorenzo Mastroianni

Lukka reached toward the Phyrexian centaur hulk with his mind, commanding it to *secure me*. It did, but not in the way he intended. Veiny wires sprouted from its torso, plunging through his skin and wiggling through his gut to wrap around his spine. It should've hurt. It didn't. *This isn't what I meant*. Each fiber left a cooling numbness behind it. Lukka felt one with it: his spine cradled, his bones held.

He twisted. His arms now free, he drew his harpoon. He slung it at their attacker. His harpoon pinned the surprised Phyrexian monstrosity to a tree. Oily blood sprayed across his face. He tugged the harpoon free, reeling it back in. The body tumbled to the ground.

The liver-colored scavengers dove after the falling corpse with happy cries. *Only the fittest deserve to survive*.

The Wanderer watched Lukka from her own tree. "I'm useless over here," she muttered, and then, with another flicker, planeswalked away.

Nissa stared at him in horror, her green eyes wide. She had blood on her face. Did she have a head wound? Sometimes even shallow cuts to the scalp could bleed profusely, looking worse than they were. But if she had severe head trauma, she wouldn't be able to fight. He needed to know if he could count on her. He reached down to push her hair back. She recoiled, instinctively, and began to fall. He seized her. Her extra weight caused the centaur hulk to tighten its internal ties on him. It had rooted inside him.

Nissa stopped struggling. She searched their environment as if looking for a location where she could disembark. But there was nothing: only the slick metal trunk and a long drop down. She could either hang on or give up and planeswalk away. She hung on. Her lips grew taut with a frown.

The centaur hulk, and his bond with it, had saved them both.

He and Nissa had reached a high point in the Hunter Maze's canopy. The light here was brighter, a hotter and richer yellow, like butter on his tongue. The "tree" the Phyrexian was scaling had narrowed, now thin enough that it trembled under their weight.

You deserve power. You are strong. Here, strength is rewarded. The weak are culled.

He didn't know whether it was as obvious to Nissa as it was to him, but now they'd reached a height that they needed to move parallel to the ground again, perhaps even until they'd reached the forest's edge. The intertwining branches, gnarled as wood but made of metal and flesh, formed a network of roads that life traveled upon. Leaves glimmered, fist-size stomata opening and closing as the trees breathed. Berries, large as severed heads, dangled in bunches. Flowers, intestine-pink and rank as a butcher's shop, dripped black oil.

He hadn't noticed how beautiful it all was until now.

The centaur hulk leaped from their tree to the next, landing hard on another bracket mushroom platform. Lukka ordered it to withdraw its tendrils. It did so without protest. He disembarked. Nissa eyed his stomach but there was no sign the Phyrexian had ever been inside him except for a few tears in his shirt, which could have come from anything. Not even one drop of blood marred the fabric.

Nissa walked to the platform's edge. She looked around as if searching for the route. She shook her head, finding nothing. He had the sense that if the path had divided, she would've suggested that they part ways. But it didn't. The greenery was so dense he could see only one way forward. So, her choice was to go with him or planeswalk home. The Phyrexian's mind told him that this was the correct route.

Nissa fell into step beside him. She only twined her fingers together and stretched them, now gazing upward. "I still can't see the exit."

"It's there." He could feel the sun's life-giving warmth along his back. Really, when he thought about it, these trees were perfect organisms, so large and strong with so little to sustain them. *You are like that, too. You have always taken what you've been given. You've made the best of what you had.*

The path led into a sphincter-like opening. It lay open, panting in the dimness.

"Come on." He headed into it.

"Wait—" Nissa pursued him, and then stopped.

The opening sucked shut behind them. Nissa pivoted toward him. She gave him a suspicious once-over but said nothing.

He resumed walking. The Phyrexian centaur hulk trotted ahead, obedient.

The passage's smell reminded him of a battlefield: the stink of blood and emptied bowels. The dim walls around him glowed with the lamina's sickly green light, and the passage's fronded surface waved them forward, like the cilia inside a gut.

Nissa followed him, reluctant. She was so ready to criticize him, but it wasn't like she had a better plan. He was the one who'd gotten them both this far, practically dragging her dead weight. He didn't even know why Nissa had chosen to participate in this attack.

The less deserving should perish to make way for those who are smarter and more ruthless.

He'd always believed in meritocracy. Excellence, skill, training, talent: that's how he'd risen to captaincy of the Specials.

A motion between his shirt and his skin caught his attention. He poked his fingers through the holes in his clothing, expecting to find a trapped mosquito.

Something grabbed his finger, soft and sucker-like.

He cast a glance behind him, but Nissa searched the passage for danger. She wasn't looking at him.

He peeked through a hole in his shirt. Some Phyrexian rootlets had remained inside him. Now they kissed his fingers, like sea anemones.

What if you never felt pain or fear? What if you only ever felt certainty and belonging—the knowledge that what you do is right because you're the one who's doing it?

"What is it?" Nissa asked.

Lukka pulled his fingers back guiltily. He'd told her that he would back down if he experienced any physical changes as a result of his bond with the Phyrexian abomination. But those delicate tendrils, pulsing at his fingertips wetly, didn't hurt. He felt healthier, stronger, more confident—more like himself than he'd felt in a long time.

He smiled at Nissa.

"I think you bruised my ribs during the climb," he said. "Holding onto me so tight. Scared, were you?"

Nissa frowned. "Are you sure we're going the right way?"

"Very."

Around him, the walls sighed in satisfaction. He headed in deeper, toward the sound. Did Nissa hear it, too? He thought maybe that he heard voices. Not whispers, but murmurs. Perhaps they were headed toward a group of fellow Planeswalkers, also separated during the initial attack. But more likely, he guessed, they walked toward the enemy.

He would've thought that after the climb, after several fights, he would've been achy—but he wasn't. His knees did feel different, as did the joints of his hips—like they'd reformed themselves into a stronger, more efficient shape.

There is strength in change and power in flexibility. Only winning matters.

A swarm of leech-like creatures emerged from the cilia around them. Their bodies razor-sharp and glistening with teeth, they seethed toward Lukka with surprising speed. The Phyrexian centaur hulk lunged into action, squashing the pulpy creatures.

The Wanderer flickered into existence beside them. For a split second, she seemed confused but then launched herself into action, drawing her blade and slicing through the creatures in long, devastating arcs.

"Out of one danger, into another," she muttered.

Nissa chopped through the creatures with her own sword and kicked them away before they could scramble up her legs. Lukka didn't even draw his harpoon. It wouldn't be effective against creatures as insubstantial as these—they were so small he could grab them and rip them in two. His hands, his fingers, felt sharp, metallic. He couldn't remember when that change had occurred, but it must've been recent. He could slice the swarming creatures open with his fingernails, scattering pearls of purple guts to the ground. But they kept coming.

The ground beneath them heaved awake, and he realized they'd walked into the mother-creature, lodged on the floor of the passage, her babies buried in her flesh like pustules. The floor contorted again, teeth emerging, multiple mouths opening at his feet.

The Wanderer yelped and sprinted out of the beast's mouth.

Nissa grabbed his hand and pulled Lukka forward. The two leaped out of the beast's maw onto the flatter, dryer, and more metallic floor ahead.

Behind them, the mother-beast curled upward and around the Phyrexian centaur hulk to engulf it. Its anguished, furious pain roared through Lukka. How could he have ever thought that this creature was mechanical, emotionless? No, it had been subdued, lying in wait, evaluating him. He ran forward.

"Don't!" Nissa said. "Just leave it!"

But strength like he'd never known before coursed through him and he sprang forward—in a leap that defied gravity, propelling himself into the creature's central maw. *These changes don't seem so bad, Nissa. They're useful, more than anything.*

His fingernails, gleaming like metal, were so sharp, his hands were so sharp, he sliced right through the mother-monstrosity. He pulled apart a lip of flesh and freed his Phyrexian. The entrapping creature, split in two, shuddered with its gooey death throes. Its arterial spurts slowed as it died. Its children scattered and fled.

The Phyrexian centaur hulk staggered forward and lay down, prostrate with gratitude, at Lukka's feet.

The Wanderer had cut a strip of white fabric from her clothes to bind a wound in Nissa's forearm. One of the leech-like creatures must've removed a chunk of flesh.

"Are you strong enough to continue?" He tried to be sympathetic. *Only survivors deserve to live. The strong have the right to slay the weak. The duty.*

"We should planeswalk out of here," Nissa said.

"We've almost reached the maze's center," Lukka said.

Nissa gave him a hard look. "We were trying to get *out*. To the *surface*."

Lukka frowned. He couldn't remember when his goals had changed. Had they changed? He felt like he'd been headed in this direction all along. He pondered this, staring down at his arms and hands. The problem, of course, with sticking his hands into the creatures to fight them was that he'd gotten bite marks all over him. He hadn't noticed at the time, and they didn't hurt now. They'd already started to scab, thick blackish crusts forming over each wound.

"What do you think?" Lukka asked the Wanderer, finally. "Have you been in contact with the other Planeswalkers? Should we retreat?"

The Wanderer hesitated, then shook her head. "I've seen a lot of this plane as I've tried to remain stable. One of the things I saw was Vorinclex."

Lukka picked at a scab. When it came away, underneath, he saw wriggling, maggot-like motion. Beneath that, his ulna glistened—metallic. A bone-deep wound, he marveled, and it didn't even hurt.

"Vorinclex," Nissa repeated.

"Yes," the Wanderer said. "We're close. You're close. What's more, I think Vorinclex is recovered from his journey to Kaldheim. We need to take him down before he hurts anyone else."

"That's not what we're here to do," Nissa said. "We should get back to the others."

For once, Lukka agreed with her. "It's off mission."

"It's an opportunity," the Wanderer said—then, in a white flash of light, she planeswalked involuntarily away.

Nissa seemed to be thinking. “I don’t know if we could find the others, even if we tried. If we killed one of the Norn’s allies, though, it might give them a better chance.”

Lukka considered. To get this close and not attack well, it would be cowardly. “You’re right. So’s the Wanderer. We take out Vorinclex.”

Nissa scrutinized him as if gauging his worth as an ally. “Which way?”

It got easier as they approached the center of the maze—either it was unguarded or something greater and more predatory had devoured the smaller monstrosities. The thick susurrus of voices, all unintelligible, was so loud that it made thought impossible.

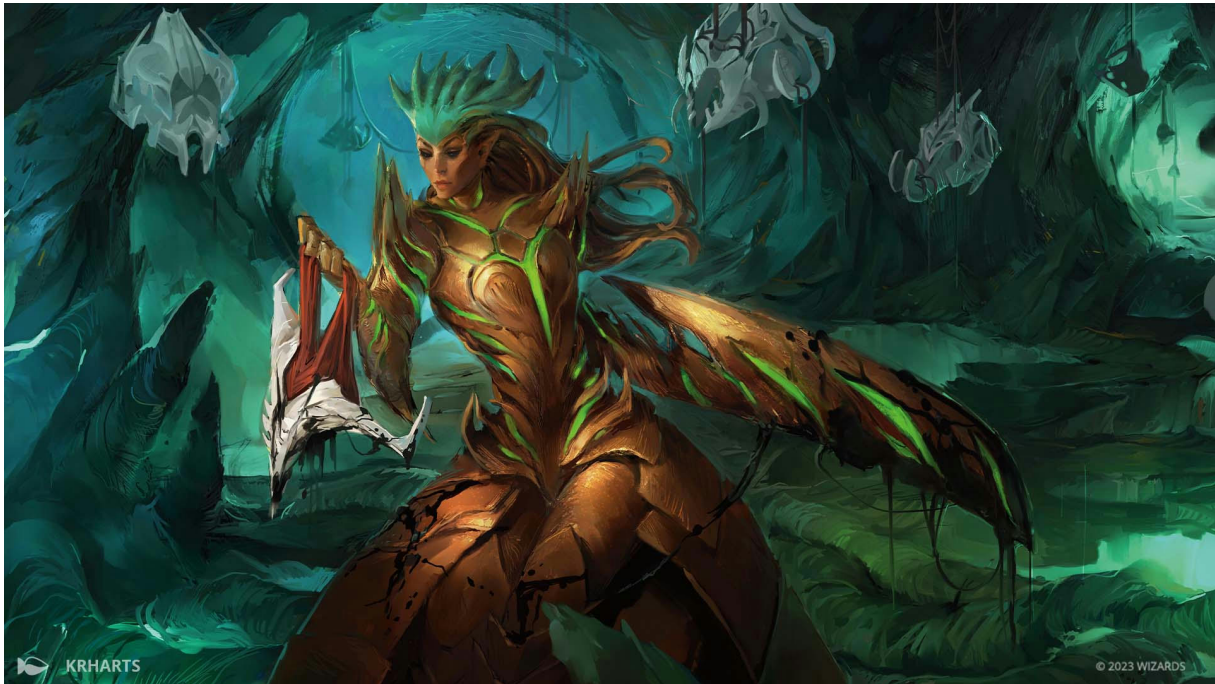
Lukka had to wonder why Nissa didn’t show any signs of disturbance. Perhaps she was tougher than he’d thought.

The cilia lining the maze walls all waved as if an invisible current pulled them toward the center medallion. In Vorinclex’s chamber, the cilia grew thicker and longer and paler, a glistening, yellowy white, and the floor depressed into a cavernous hole that resembled a starfish’s mouth. He heard a metal clash, the unmistakable sound of blade on blade, followed by the harsh slide of a parry. Then he saw them.

Vorinclex fought a Phyrexian elf beneath the monstrous skulls that hung from the ceiling. The elf seemed fused with copper metal plates and needed no sword. Her arm was a blade. Glissa. That was her name. He’d met her, briefly. Vorinclex towered over her, twelve feet of metal, bone, and weeping flesh. He brought his muscular arms down onto Glissa as if trying to pin her to the floor with his massive talons. Glissa spun aside with an echoing laugh, the writhing copper cords of her hair flowing behind her.

Lukka couldn’t tell if they battled or if they played.

Glissa flanked Vorinclex, bringing her bladed arm down across his furred shoulders, and Vorinclex met her, parrying her blow again. Lukka had never seen such a joyous expression of combat. The two of them danced—almost seemed to float—across the bobbing, pallid cilia on the floor.



Art by: Krharts

Nissa grasped his wrist. She whispered, “The two of us could’ve taken Vorinclex. Maybe. But both Vorinclex *and* Glissa.”

“There’s two of them and two of us,” Lukka said.

Nissa gave him a sharp look. “Kaya said she could barely handle Vorinclex alone.”

“We can do it.”

“Are you listening to me?” Nissa hissed.

“We also have my ally. The Phyrexian abomination.”

Without another word, Lukka charged in. Nissa, behind him, let out a string of curses that would’ve made even Chandra blush. But she followed right at his heels, like he knew she would. She would not let an ally face combat alone.

Lukka threw himself at Glissa while Nissa fought Vorinclex.

Glissa spun, with a hiss, and threw up her clawed hands in defense. Lukka didn’t need a weapon to attack her—he, too, had his own claws. He exchanged blows with Glissa, and she grinned. They were perfectly matched. He hadn’t felt like this in years, not since his last great sparring match in the Coppercoats. Glissa seemed to feel the same, and he could hear himself laughing—laughing with pure happiness.

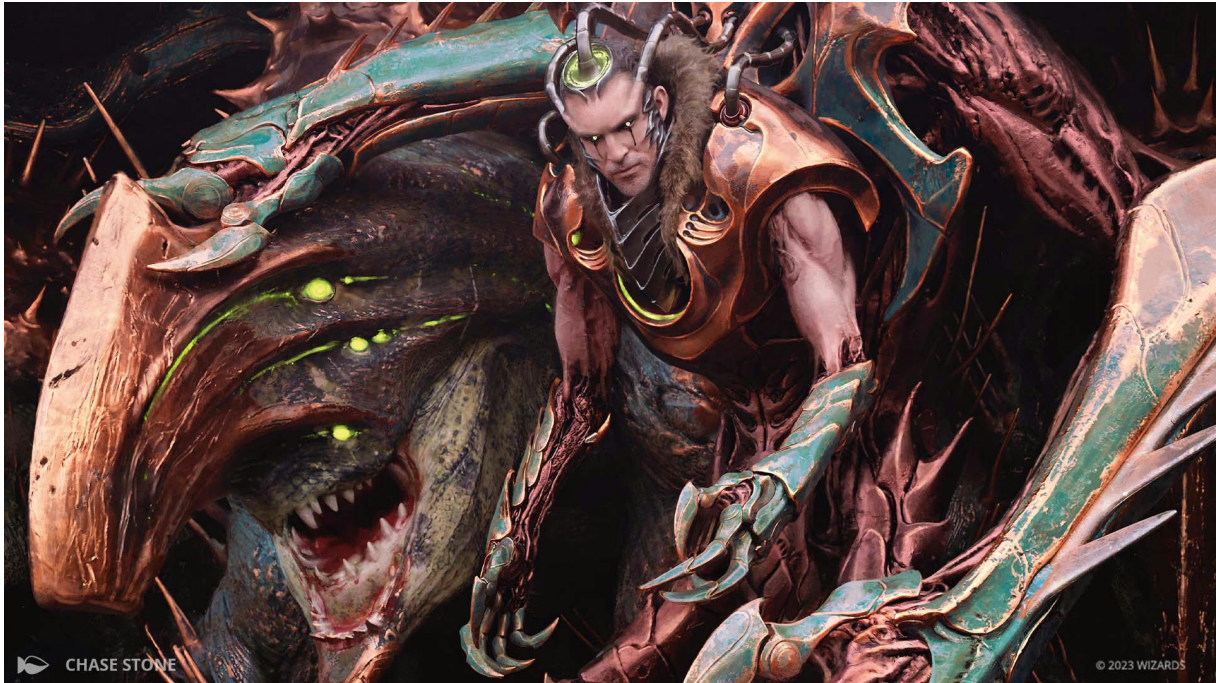
But then Lukka stumbled.

Glissa lunged forward, ready to spear him through with her bladed arm. As if he’d let her! He didn’t want this fight to end.

He used his eludha. His Phyrexian ally rushed into the fight. *Join me*, he told it, craving its power, its strength. The Phyrexian flowed into him. Its tendrils writhed into his body. The rootlets inside him sprung out to meet it. He could feel the Phyrexian move into him and then *become* him. His skin split like it was overripe, more than ready for this change. His body folded outward like a blossoming flower, his ribs opening as the Phyrexian lodged itself inside him, its arms becoming his arms.

It was ready to serve him until the end. To lose its life to save him. Such loyalty. It was his, obedient and submissive in every way.

His spine became its spine, and he stood now upon its legs, towering over Glissa. He had his arms, still, sharper and defter, but the Phyrexian's arms now formed a second set of arms with a greater reach. He'd always felt like his weapon was part of him—now it was. He stabbed at Glissa, and she danced back atop the cilia with a bright, encouraging laugh.



Art by: Chase Stone

Lukka's match with Glissa had brought him closer to Nissa and Vorinclex's. Nissa hadn't done badly. The praetor bled ichor from a dozen slashes along its body.

"Get—the elf," Vorinclex rasped.

Nissa glanced at him. Then she glanced again: disgusted and horrified. She backed off. She was outnumbered and she knew it.

Lukka advanced on Nissa. He was one with the centaur hulk, and combined with it, they were both mightier. Nissa retreated cautiously, anger and fear overwriting the horror on her features. Finally, she feared him. Respected him.

This is how it's supposed to be. The strong triumphing over the weak. This is how life is. This is what living means. He learned that lesson well when his bond was revealed and his people had turned against him. He always knew he wanted to be the one who was hitting, not the one who was being hit, because there are only two types of people in this world. *There are those who take it, then there are those who deal it.* Nissa maintained her steady return toward the passage that they'd used to enter Vorinclex's chambers. Nissa had her sword up, guarding against a blow from him. It looked like she was thinking, trying to decide whether to stay in the Hunter Maze or planeswalk away. He had to get her now, before she escaped. He raised his hands and advanced on Nissa, reveling in their sharpness—he didn't need a weapon, he *was* the weapon.

The Wanderer flickered back into existence between him and Nissa, and she instinctively raised her sword in a parry. His hands slammed down into it, but she caught the blow, gritting her teeth against the weight of it, and forcing him away.

“Lukka?” Then her battle anger, too, transformed into confusion. “Nissa, run!”

Nissa gave him a pained, furious look.

And she ran.

“By the Nine Hells, not this—” the Wanderer said and flickered away.

Glissa smiled at him, the visible mechanism along her jaw and cheek revealing her raw beauty. He’d earned this. He’d always known he was different, given his ability to bond with animals. He’d always known he was better. He could return home and there wasn’t a monster on the plane that could challenge him now.

He’d finally become himself, who he was meant to be.

“Stop,” Glissa said, and Lukka stopped, waiting for further instruction. “Find the elf, Lukka. But do not kill her. New Phyrexia will have a use for her in the war to come.”

Beside him, he heard Vorinclex’s low, growling laughter, he felt the vicarious pleasure that Glissa took in his confidence, and he felt himself smile. The Hunter Maze was expansive, and beautiful, and terrible—and it was time to go hunting.