

The Shadows of Prahv, Part 2

Jenna Helland

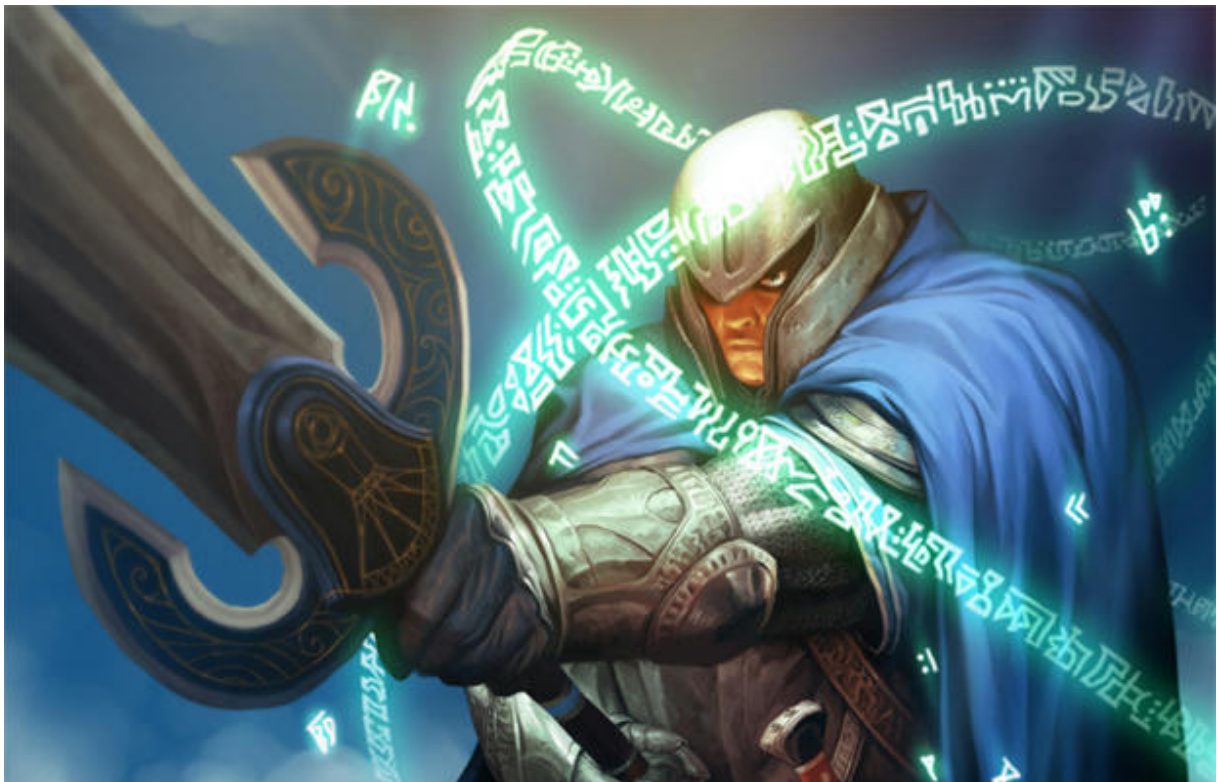
From set *Return to Ravnica*

Javy's cryptic note led Relov to a disreputable tenement building. Fourth floor. East End. Javy was waiting for him in a dim corridor that smelled of rat poison. Despite the sordid surroundings, she looked as immaculate as always. Her Boros uniform fitted her as if it had been sewn by the best on Tailor's Row.

"Javy, so good to see you," he said. He kissed her on her cheek. She smiled faintly and then punched him lightly on the shoulder. She looked thinner than he remembered, but there were no other signs of the ordeal that had kept her in the healing wards for months. He was relieved to see that her face hadn't been scarred in the beating.

"Any word on the executions statute?" Javy asked.

"Not yet," Relov lied. At Javy's request, he'd suggested stricter limitations on executions, but his proposal had been killed by Grand Arbiter Leonos a year ago. He hadn't the heart to tell her.



Art by Scott Chou

Javy motioned to the room behind them. "See if you recognize him."

The windowless room was worse than the building itself. Gray mold streaked the walls and the cracks crisscrossed the ceiling. A gilded bed frame almost filled the space, which smelled like rotting potatoes. The hump in the middle of the bed was almost unrecognizable as a corpse. In life, he had been a fat man. In death, he looked deflated—marooned—like a fish washed onto unfamiliar shores. Large puddles of sticky blood dotted the uneven floor.

“I’m not going in there,” Relov retorted. Javy thrust her hand-lamp in his direction.

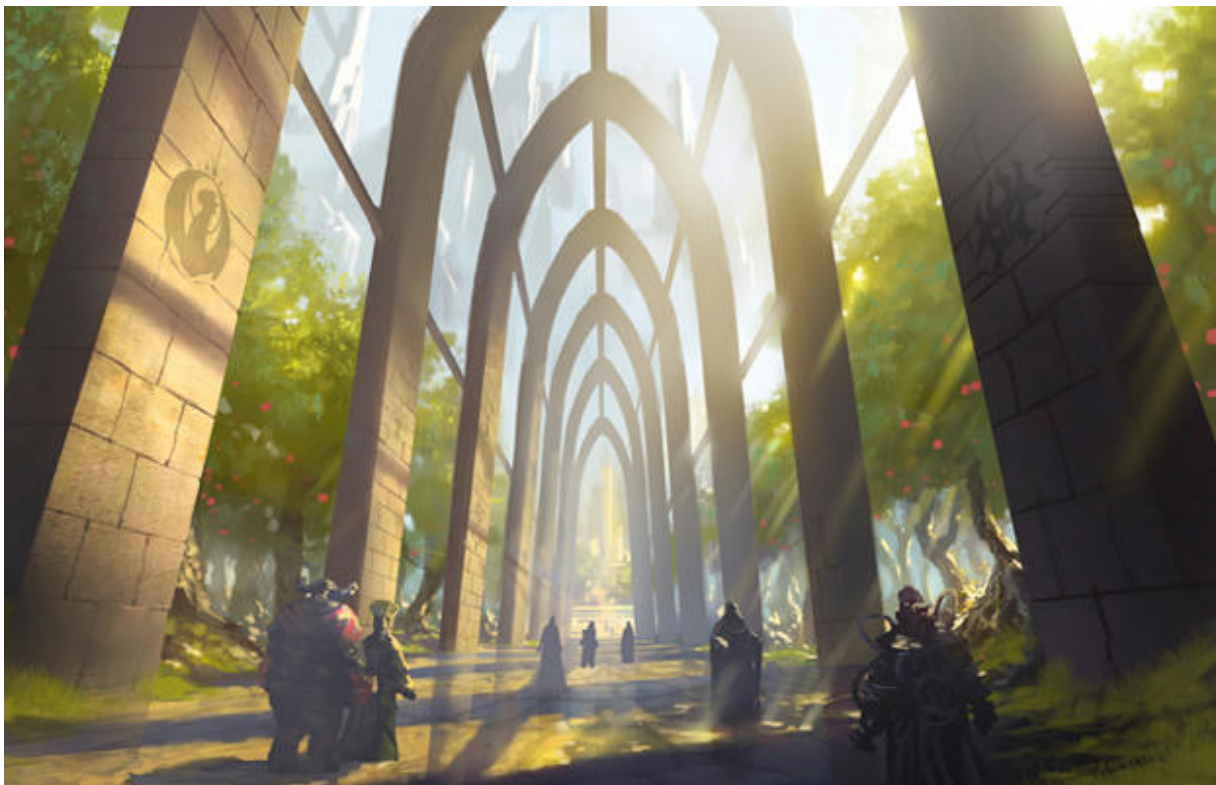
“Stay to the edge,” she said. “And pay close attention to the skin.”

Relov muttered something unkind under his breath and entered into the hideous little room. He tiptoed to the bedside and peered at the corpse. The skin looked splotchy, but in a strangely mathematical way. Despite his disgust, he leaned closer. Words had been magically imprinted over every inch of the dead man’s body. The words were tiny, almost too small to decipher. But they were deep enough for blood to empty through the open wounds. The victim’s skin sagged disturbingly but Relov could make out a few words: *law* ; *judge* ; *proof* .

“Buckets of blood indeed,” Relov said when he returned to the corridor. “That’s horrific.”

“His name is Zivan,” Javy said. “An Arbiter like yourself, or so I’ve been told. I was hoping you could give me something on him.”

Zivan had been a legendary legislator, but Relov only knew the man by his reputation. Once, Zivan had talked for sixteen hours straight, just to stonewall a request for refugee assistance. Relov had heard rumors of Zivan’s fall from grace, but this was, well, humbling.



Transguild Promenade | Art by Noah Bradley

Later, Relov sat with Javy on a bench in the Transguild Promenade. Light streamed through gaps in the ceremonial archways and a cool breeze rustled the trees along the footpath. It was a workday afternoon, and pedestrian traffic was light. Relov loved the promenade, where the bustle of the city was muted by Azorius noise wards.

Javy listened attentively as he recounted everything he remembered about Arbiter Zivan, which honestly wasn't much.

"He was well respected in his day," Relov finished. "An exquisite debater with sound legal reasoning. But he squandered it in Rakdos pleasure houses and hasn't been one of us for quite some time."

"You don't know which pleasure house, by any chance?" Javy asked.

Relov laughed. "Not my area of expertise." He had no interest in what Rakdos offered.

"Did you ever work with Zivan?" Javy asked.

"Not directly," Relov told her.

"Are you sure?" She opened her document case and handed him a faded parchment. It was an old Mass Arrest Order, dated from when Relov had just been promoted to Arbiter. His own signature was among a handful of his peers, including Arbiter Zivan's.

"I sign hundreds of documents a day," he explained. "That doesn't mean I knew him personally."

"Read the rest of the names," she said. "Notice anything about them?"

"No, should I?" Relov asked with irritation. He hated the feeling that someone knew something he didn't.

"They're all dead," she said. "Except for you."

Relov looked more closely and saw that she was correct. They were all deceased. Two of them in the past year alone.



Art by Johannes Voss

"Some of these gentlemen were quite old..."

“This document authorized a sweep of the Gulgari Undercity,” Javy interrupted him. “It was the largest the Azorius had ever attempted. It turned violent and nearly a hundred were killed, many while in custody.”

Relov thought hard. “I remember it. There was a public outcry over a couple of guards. They were accused of butchery or some such nonsense.”

He noticed that Javy was clenching her fist. In the sunlight, the back of her hand was a spider web of fine white scars. She closed her eyes and tipped her face toward the sun. He waited for a few moments, but she didn’t move.

“Javy, how have you been since the attack?” Relov asked bluntly. “I heard the perpetrator was released on a technicality.”

Javy whipped her head toward him and bared her teeth, like a little dog about to tear into the meat of his leg. “If by ‘technicality’ you mean ‘bribe,’ then yes, yes he did.”

“Now, Javy...” Relov said soothingly.

“Someone is killing Azorius,” she said calmly, her face again a mask of professionalism. “Someone with a grudge against you, specifically.”



Hallowed Fountain | Art by Jung Park

“Why do you think that?” Relov asked. “Based on this document? How did you find this anyway?”

Javy shrugged. “I didn’t. It was provided to me. I’m investigating a series of murders.”

“What murders?” Relov asked with alarm.

“Someone is... slaughtering people in the manner in which they lived their lives,” she replied.

Relov looked at her with exasperation. “Try to be less vague, will you? Meaning what?”

"If they were selfish, then they die of that urge. If they were vicious, they face that judgment in death. You see what I mean?"

"No," Relov said honestly. "I really don't."

"Well, last week a man was hung from a pillar in the forum. I'm told he loved the public eye. The week before that, a judge's heart was removed and sent to the victims he denied justice. Or your Mr. Zivan. He lived by the power of words, and died of the same. "

"Well," Relov said. He'd heard nothing about this, and felt a little rattled. "I appreciate your warning."

"Watch out for yourself," she said, brushing against his arm with the back of her hand.

As soon as Relov got back to New Prahv, he filled out an Application for Constant Protection.

Branko One-Ear left the Azorius after the raid. With the help of his father, he purchased a rickety tenement near Keyhole Downs. Over the years, the building became part of Rakdos territory. People only lived there if they could afford nowhere else. Even after the Rakdos moved on, Branko showed no interest in fixing the broken Izzet heat-pipes or cleaning out the rubbish from the stairwells.

A tenant found him propped up against the cornerstone in the filthy alley behind his tenement. The top of his skull has been neatly removed by magical incision. His brain removed and placed in his lap, and there it sat, like a pet dog. The empty skull jammed full with worthless coins.

"A fitting end," Javy mused, casting a quick glance around Relov's library. It was dark outside the great glass window, or else she could have seen the new house-garden he had recently commissioned from Selesnya.

"Gruesome," was Relov's reply. "But what does it have to do with me?"

"That's it, isn't it?" Javy said quietly. "Everything is about you."

Her comment annoyed him, but he held his tongue. It was near midnight, and somehow she had convinced his doorman to let her into his townhouse. She wasn't in uniform tonight. She wore loose black pants and a tunic, like a commoner. She had arrived bearing a strange collection of emotions, of which he couldn't quite decipher. So he sat behind his enormous mahogany desk and waited.



Art by Svetlin Velinov

“He was one of the guards during the Golgari raid. He should’ve faced trial and been held accountable.”

“So, he’s another in your series of murders?” Relov guessed.

“Tell me about the raid,” Javy said.

“I don’t know anything about it,” Relov told her.

“You ordered it,” Javy reminded him.

“That’s not entirely accurate,” Relov protested. “I just signed the paper. And I wasn’t there. I’ve never been to the Detention Compound in my life.”

“When you put your little mark on one of those edicts, do you ever think about what it means?” Javy demanded. “There are people on the other end of them, Relov. People’s lives are affected terribly by your signature.”

“Of course I think about them,” Relov retorted. But even as he said it, he knew it wasn’t true.



Art by Karl Kopinski

“You used to,” Javy agreed. “But not anymore. Do you remember those people we helped? Ever think about them? Wonder if you’re just killing them now, instead of then?”

“What do they have to do with anything?” Relov asked. “We have rules. The Boros have rules. I suppose even the Gulgari have rules. *Rules* are not the problem.”

“So what is the problem?” Javy asked.

“I don’t *see* a problem,” Relov said pointedly. But he did. And it had barged uninvited into his home at midnight.

“No, not from your pretty mansion, you wouldn’t,” Javy said sadly. “She was right about you. I disagreed at first, but she was right.”

“Who, your guildmaster?” Relov asked. He’d heard rumors that Guildmaster Aurelia was radicalizing her Boros soldiers, and if so, the Azorius couldn’t let it stand.

“I have found a new teacher, and she eclipses my work with the Boros,” Javy told him. “She holds the truth. Life into death and death into life. It’s an eternal circle, and those who disturb it with their own ambitions must experience a profound death. “

Relov stared at Javy and decided she must have lost her mind.

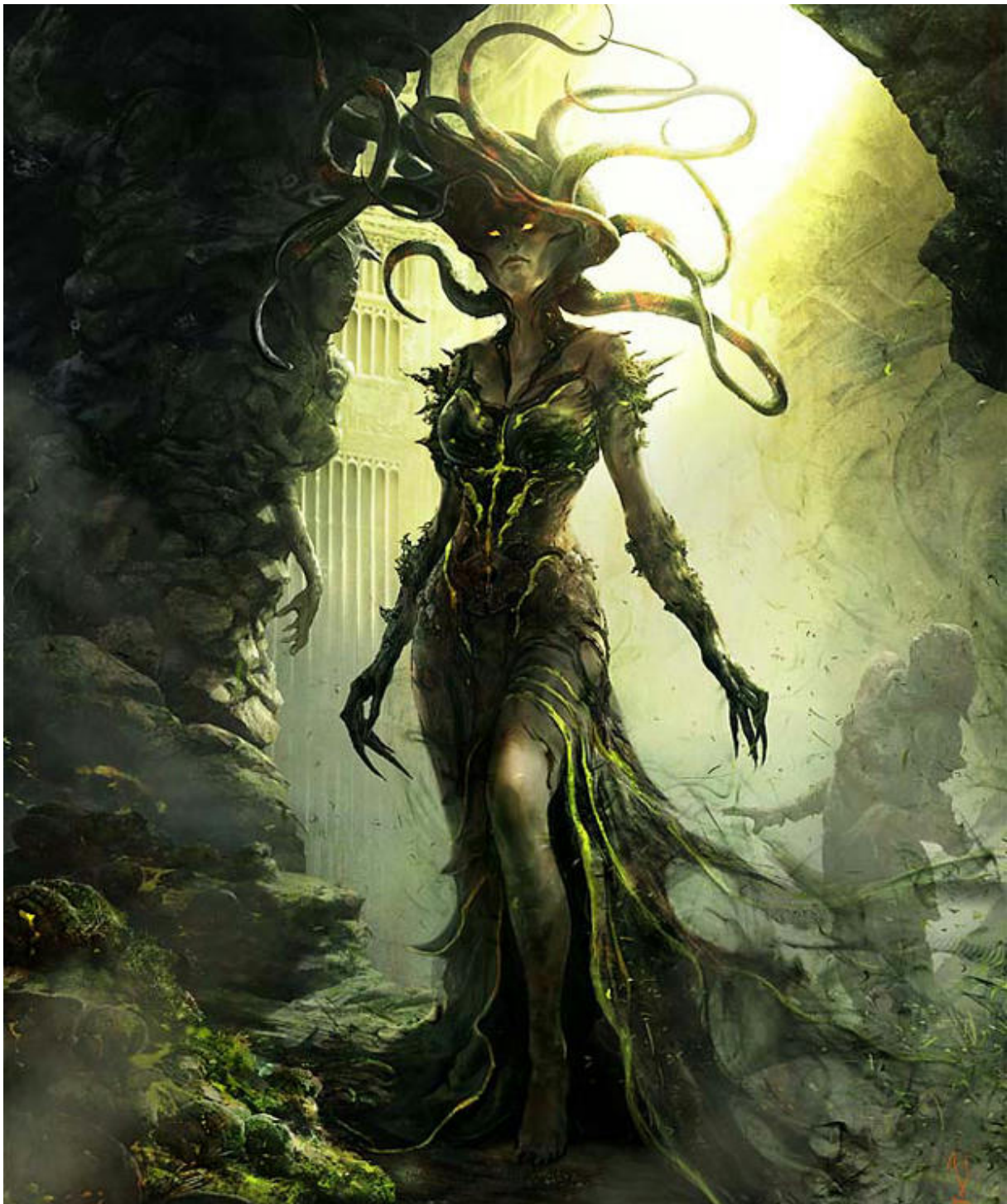
“A person’s existence cycle should be punctuated by the nature in which they lived,” Javy continued earnestly. “Only that will incite reiteration in the darkest roots.”

“You’re scaring me, Javy,” he told her. He disliked metaphysical nonsense, but coming from one of his oldest friends, it was downright repugnant.

“Am I?” she mused. “For the first time, *I* feel no fear. You sign away people’s lives like they’re rats to be exterminated. You cozy up to men like the one who... hurt me. Yet you’re safe behind your endless wall of words. At least you think you are.”

There was a loud thud outside in the hall. He jumped to his feet. Javy didn't move.

"That will be your doorman falling dead to the floor. Next, your door will open. And you'll see the face of your judge."



Vraska the Unseen | Art by Aleksi Briclot

"Don't look her in the face," Javy ordered Relov as the gorgon swept into the room.

Relov backed away in horror, keeping his eyes on the floor. He'd never seen a gorgon before, but every child in Ravnica had heard horror stories of what they could do.

“You should be honored,” Javy said. “Of all the killings I’ve done in her name, she’s never wanted to be a part of one before.”

Vraska grabbed him by the throat, and he squeezed his eyelids tight. Her face was so close to the side of his head that he could feel her cold lips against his ear. Her voice was a strange guttural growl.

“Just before your ‘guard’ would have killed me, I was torn from this world. I was cast into a dark tomb with no way out.”

Relov tried to protest. He knew nothing of the raid! Nothing of tombs or anything she was saying. But she was choking the breath out of him and whispering words only he could hear.

“It felt like lifetimes before I learned how to escape, to slip the confines of a world. But during the eternity I was trapped, I resolved that all should receive the death they deserve.”

The gorgon placed her thumbs on Relov’s eyelids. “Javy. Name a profound death. It’s yours to decide.”

Javy didn’t hesitate. “Inaction,” she said.

The gorgon smiled thinly. “Perfect.”

By morning the new statue had already been installed near the main gate, much to the surprise of the Stewards, who weren’t expecting it for another week. There was some kerfuffle among the Arbiters, who said it didn’t really look like Grand Arbiter Leonos. See the unpleasant gaping of the lips? And there was entirely too much hair. But the craftsmanship was exquisite, so the chatter ended soon enough.

No one looked long enough to see the uncanny resemblance to the missing Relov or the terror in his unblinking eyes.