

The Hand That Moves

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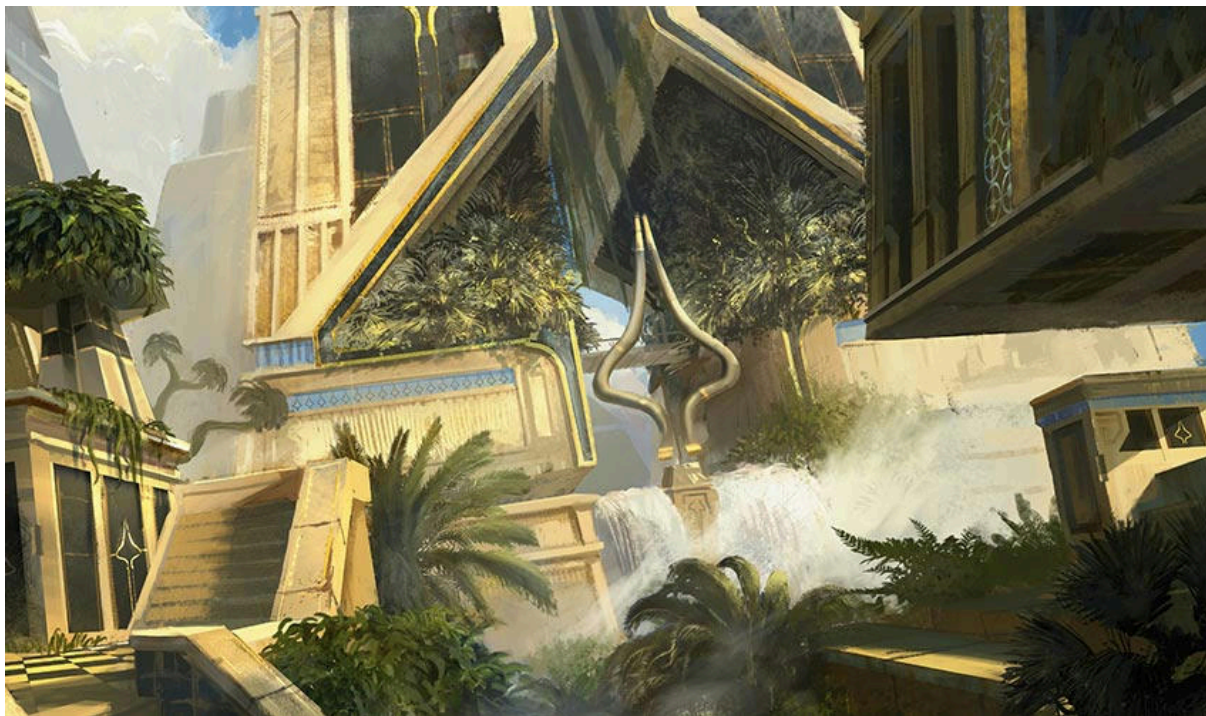
From set *Amonkhet*

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Nissa discovered hints of Amonkhet's past, a history Nicol Bolas has overwritten. Now she seeks answers from the God of Knowledge, hoping Kefnet can explain the veneer that seems to obscure the plane.

Nissa wandered through empty streets, meandering through hell.



Forest | Art by Titus Lunter

Most of her senses told her the city was beautiful. Giant palm leaves rustled gently under soft breezes, clear water bubbled in pools and fountains, birdsong melodies chirped and trilled in harmonious counterpoint. Tantalizing smells wafted through the air. Fresh baked bread here. Lilies and jasmine there.

If one looked, if one listened, they were in paradise. But when Nissa closed her eyes and extended her mana sense, the paradise crumbled.

The leylines of Amonkhet, the very bones and blood of the world, were stunted. Normally endless lines of pulsing mana, but on this world they were concentrated into this decadent city. Here, behind the barrier, they were strong and stout.

But that strength came with a cost. A dark virulent strain wove its way through the leylines. This was not the deadening corruption of the Eldrazi. It had a vitality the Eldrazi lacked. The pulsing darkness interlaced through and around the mana, a python choking its prey.

Nissa opened her eyes and paradise reappeared. The leaves, the water, the birds. She closed her eyes again. The slippery snake squeezing its victims. The juxtaposition between the beauty and horror almost brought her to her knees. She opened her eyes and closed them again, the rapid changes both compelling and nauseating.

She continued her wandering, occasionally stopping to close her eyes and glimpse horror. Her stomach and head rebelled, growing in agony, but she pressed on. She needed to find Kefnet. The God of Knowledge. She needed answers.

When next she opened her eyes, the god was staring at her.

The large head of an ibis gazed at her steadily, eyes unblinking, its long beak pointing straight at her, through her, to a horrible destiny no less awful for being unknown. She crumpled to the ground, her will sapped in the presence of this cruel divinity.

She blinked once, twice. It was a statue. Just a statue. Kefnet, the God of Knowledge. *What use is knowledge in a world like this? Behind all veils is blight. Only blight.* She stood slowly, awkwardly, her stomach and head still in protest.

Underneath the large stone head and the cruel fixed eyes, a pair of large limestone doors swung open. A bright blue glow emanated from the shadows behind the door.

A greeting. An invitation. She stepped forward into the blue light.

She was in a small anteroom, a cool blue light from a larger space at the other end shading the smooth stone walls and floors. The doors quietly swung shut behind her, the light outside snuffed, and Nissa was relieved to be free of the city's beguiling regard. A young man in pale robes stood behind a wooden lectern, turning pages of a book. He turned a few more pages as Nissa stood there, a thin smile on his face though he said nothing.

"Excuse me . . ." she began, unsure of protocol and propriety. She was never sure of protocol and propriety, amongst people.

The young man raised his head, his smile vanishing. "Do not speak, initiate! You know . . ." His voice trailed off as he took in the sight of Nissa. She felt a clumsy pawing at the outskirts of her thoughts, her association with Jace and his telepathy allowing her to recognize the attempts of a novice. His skittering probing ceased, having failed to find any purchase.

"You . . . you . . . are not from here," he finished weakly.

"I am here to speak with Kefnet," she said, with more confidence than perhaps was warranted. But the gods seemed to move freely around the city, their presence a given amongst their people. Why not Kefnet?

The young man's eyes closed and stayed closed, his attention seemingly lost. Nissa had thought this chamber a refuge from the bright deceit of the city, but now grew certain there was no refuge to be found. Nothing made sense on this world; nothing was as it should be.

Perhaps I bring the blight with me.

The thought startled. Always before she had framed the corruption she fought on Zendikar, on Innistrad, here, as enemies without. Darkness from the outside, to be vanquished. But what if the darkness was within?

Perhaps that was why on every plane she visited she knew failure. She had failed to protect Zendikar. Failed to overcome Emrakul. Even her successes felt hollow. Perhaps she deserved this fate.

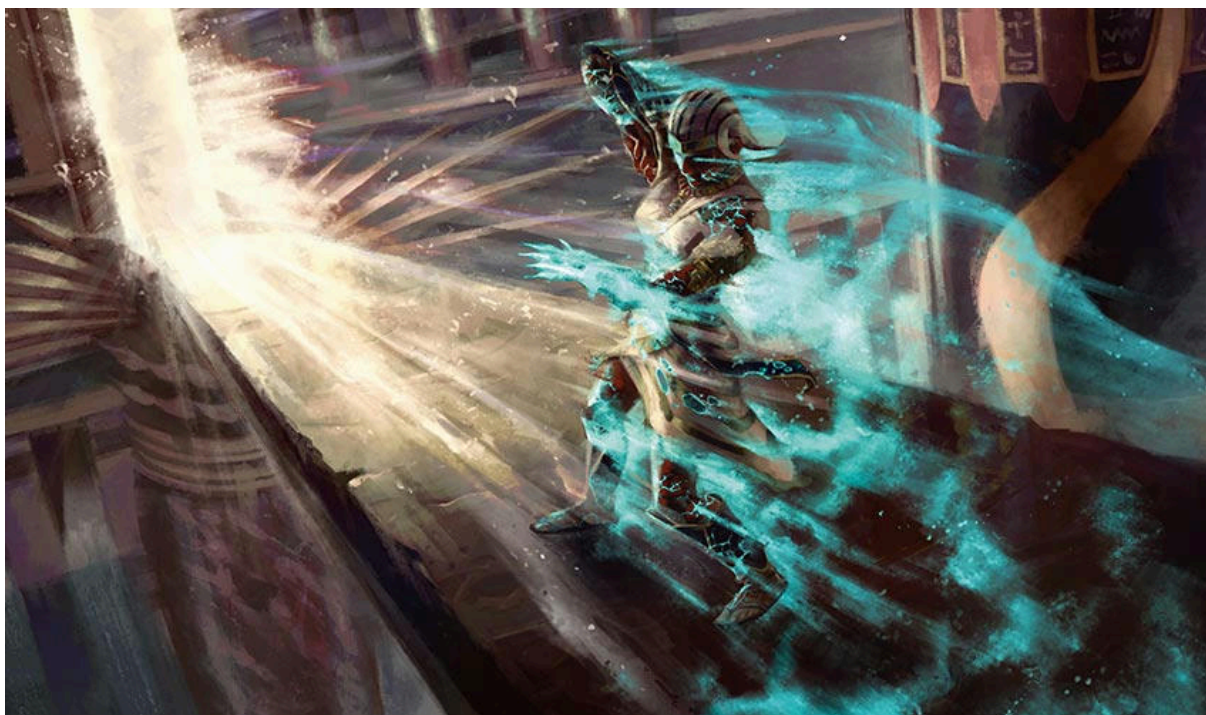
She was bringing the emptiness with her, to soil whatever she touched.

The cool blue room now felt close, stuffy. A growing panic emerged in her chest, beating and thumping to get out. The young man in front of her continued his senseless communion, his head bowed. She took a tentative step closer to the larger room at the other end of the foyer, its blue light beckoning.

The young man opened his eyes. "You have been permitted to attempt the Trial of Knowledge. There are three . . ." His voice sounded strange, strained. A pack of wild dogs chasing its prey. The panic inside her burst free, overriding reason and thought. Nissa ran to the other room, and as the man sought to intercept her, she flung him against the stone walls.

From the rough floor, a weakly uttered gasp, "No . . . you are not . . ."

She heard no more as she plunged into the blue light.



Essence Scatter | Art by Josh Hass

The angel descended from the sky. Between two suns she flew, wings unfurled, radiant light lining her perfect form. Her shut eyes opened and snakes tumbled out. Slithering brown bodies wiggling out of empty orbs. The angel flapped her wings, coming closer, closer, all the while snakes fell to the barren ground, hissing and sliding across the parched earth.

The angel opened her mouth and the skies darkened, storm clouds gathering behind her.

“I can do anything I want. Anything at all. Remember that.”

The angel came closer . . .

Nissa woke with a scream, sweat already cooling on her brow. *Emrakul* .

The monster had taken over her body back on Innistrad. But those words were not just Emrakul’s. They were Nissa’s as well.

Where am I? She had been seeking . . . something. Someone. There had been a room. She looked at the room she was in now, a different room than before. A spare cot, a threadbare blanket. Nissa ran her hand over the ratty blanket, its coarse threads surprisingly sharp. She pulled her hand away with a yelp. In the middle of her palm was a long, thin, red line. Blood began dripping from the cut. The blanket was so sharp it had cut her. More lines appeared on her body. Tiny separations blossoming red. The pain was immense. The blanket rustled over her, cutting her, over and over . . .

Nissa woke with a scream. *Where am I?* The dream had been awful. Some form of monster, with tiny teeth and claws, ripping at her . . . she shook her head. Something was wrong. She looked around her bed, but it was as if she were underwater. Nothing could come into focus. She shook her head, trying to clear her eyes, but nothing happened.

A slow paralysis crept up her spine. Her arms and legs felt glued to the bed, rooted by a merciless force. Something was wrong. She closed her eyes and she could feel the unreality surrounding her. She needed to break free.

I can do anything I want. Anything at all. Remember that. Her words. *Mine* . A burgeoning flash of green light inside her, dispelling the paralysis. She floated in mid-air, buoyed by her growing power. *What can I do?* No, that was the wrong question. *What can't I do?* The power swelled, the mere vessel of her skin unable to contain it. The flesh crackled, ruptured, but she did not care. Her power sustained her.

This is my destiny. To lose herself in the power, in the sweet rush of energy and leyline. The power was growing, burning . . .

Nissa woke with a scream. There had been a light, a green light. Something awful occurred, but as Nissa tried to remember the dream danced away, escaping the touch of memory. It had been awful, of that much she was sure.

This is wrong.

Nissa startled. There had been a voice. A voice in her head. It had sounded like her own voice, but somehow separate. She looked around, frantic, as the walls began bleeding shadows. The shadows flowed off the walls, approaching in a smooth glide. Nissa knew their touch would mean death, or worse. Nissa yelled for the others to come, but no sound emerged.

This is wrong.

It was her voice again. Nissa shut her eyes. She could feel the unreality surrounding her. She summoned power . . .

Stop. I must stop. Do not react. Think.

Nissa did not know why she should trust the voice, but she did. She took a slow breath, concentrating on the feel of her chest as she inhaled the damp air. She exhaled, letting the breath wash over her, feeling muscles loosen, expand.

I am trapped.

As she said it, some of the fog in her mind receded. She had run into the blue room, the Trial of Knowledge, the acolyte had called it. Even now she could feel the illusions and phantasms lurk over her, caressing her mind with their sickly sweet call. There had been one nightmare after another, each one cascading into the next.

She took another deep breath. *This is magic. Powerful magic.* She shuddered as she contemplated the eternal nightmare facing any unprepared initiate who failed this trial. But as powerful as the magic was, it was still composed of leylines. And Nissa had no small mastery of those.

For most of her life, Nissa's understanding and manipulation of leylines was instinctive. But every time she relied on instinct in here, she stayed trapped in nightmare. She needed more than instinct. She needed to understand.

She gazed intently at the magical structure around her, its shape and feel, the way the leylines wove together to produce such a horrible and absolute effect. She marveled at the strength and skill required to construct such a trap. It was beyond anything she had done. *Yet* .

There . In the weavings of magic surrounding her, there was a tiny gap. Small, but perceptible. Nissa tugged at the mana, continuing to keep her eyes closed, relying solely on her feel of the magic. She pushed and pulled at the opening, widening it with each tug.

The illusions intensified around her, calling her name, begging her to open her eyes, to see delight and horror, truth and fantasy, anything she wanted, only for the price of a twitch of an eyelid. She kept them tightly shut, and once the opening in her prison was wide enough, she stepped through.

She floated in an airy blue sky. No, not quite a sky. A pale blue canvas, empty, waiting for meaning. More illusion, but Nissa felt a sense of control, a wakefulness, that had eluded her during the nightmares. Below Nissa saw the remnants of the nightmare trap, dark purple swirls that had elicited such terror.



Daze | Art by Richard Wright

And now she could see through the illusions, to the architecture of the magic underneath. To the very underpinnings of this Trial of Knowledge, so cruelly designed.

I want to see. I want to see more.

She let the illusions swirl around her, gathering force and speed. A rhythmic beat played in the chamber, a beat resonating with her own heart. She closed her eyes. She witnessed.

A dark snake, winged and venomous, cast its shadow upon the desert. The snake was huge, bigger than an oak, bigger than a forest of oaks. Its shadow covered the whole world.

The shadow spoke, its voice rumbling across the empty desert. “They would take away my power. They would take away what makes me *me*. This I will not abide.”

The shadow of the snake wrapped its coils around the world.

“For what I require, I would drain every world. I would devour every single one. But I start *here*.”

The shadow *squeezed*. The world screamed. Nissa screamed.

The scene crumbled, fleeing from the pain.

She was looking up into space, into the stars. Eight stars. Eight stars in a loose circle and evenly spaced, lighting up the entire night sky.

A line of darkness, somehow visible even against the night, a line that *shone* darkness, wove its way through the eight stars. The line twisted and turned and vibrated, its pulsing a violent cry. When the

line ceased moving, it was a figure eight on its side, a snake eating its own tail. It encompassed all eight stars, each star twinkling desperately against the curtain of dark now nestled close against them.

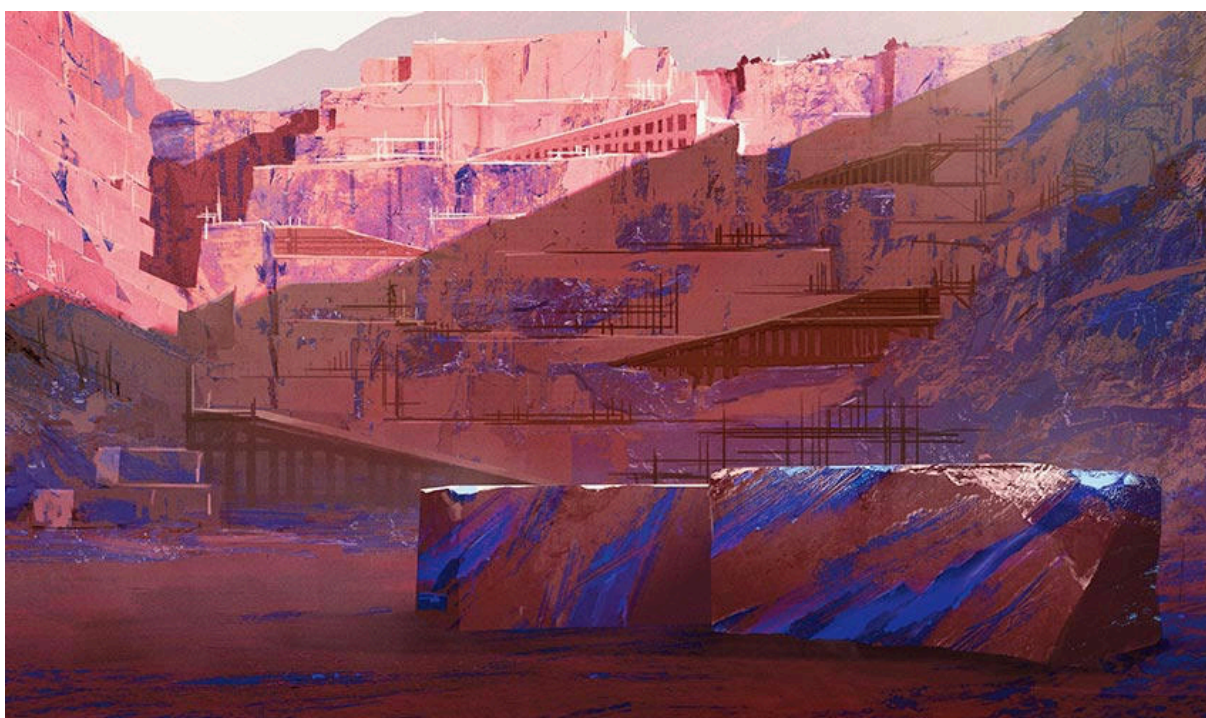
Three of the stars winked out. Their generation of light and heat snuffed. Their lives vanished.

But Nissa could still see movement where those three stars had been. Stars no more, just three dark rents in the fabric of the sky. Three dark holes, possessed of an energy and fury all their own, pulsing to a rhythm malevolent.

The five remaining stars moved, their new alignment warped, all bending to the shadowy line woven through their constellation. Their new outline suggested a pair of horns.

The scene shifted, swirls of illusion moving to paint the canvas anew.

Awkward figures wrapped in white linen bent and dug in the harsh sands. Mummies, they called them. The anointed. Hundreds, thousands of the mummies dug into a deep pit, pulling out a blue ore. Cartloads of the ore snaked their way in a large procession toward the city.



Stone Quarry | Art by Florian de Gesincourt

Farther away, three young children stopped before a barrier. The beautiful city on one side, the stark emptiness of the desert on the other. They're whispering to each other. They look around, look at each other. Uncertain. A child presses through. The two others follow. All three are swallowed by the hungry sands.

A new scene.

She saw a young man, his face erased, stumbling among a garden of statues. High above the man a growing cloud of dusk attacked the sun. From somewhere outside the garden there was a mighty roar. Shift.

Nissa saw a world, then tens of worlds, hundreds of worlds. Thousands. She saw this world, the world of Amonkhet, and wrapped around it was a dark sinewy line. That line stretched back through all the worlds, all the thousands of worlds, and she saw an unbroken line of darkness from Amonkhet all the way back to the beginning of the line.

Shift.

A large golden disc, shaped and stylized like a sun, descending from the sky. The sun disc approached a large circular stone tablet covered with strange sigils, and the two discs merged, becoming a single golden disc. Cracks appeared in the golden disc, small at first, then widening, growing. The disc crumbled away into nothingness.

The scenes shifted faster now, barely even an image forming before being replaced. A fizzling torch. A broken clock with a clean face. A mummified head facing backward atop a mummified body. A split tree, its sap oozing into the ground. A shattered shield, its shiny metallic pieces torn and scattered.

She closed her eyes against the onslaught, but still the images came tumbling through her head, crumbling her in mid-air. A falling dragon. Giants, covered in metallic blue, stomping through streets. A massive flash of light, consuming a world.

An angel descending from the sky.

Nissa opened her eyes, and the angel continued to descend. It was the angel from her nightmare. The angel that reminded her of Emrakul.

The angel's eyes were open, but unlike the dream, there were no snakes, just blank white orbs. She landed in front of Nissa.

"Why do you dally? I showed you the ways of power. Use them." The angel's voice melodious, a cool breeze. Beautiful. And beautiful the way Amonkhet was beautiful, all horror underneath.

Nissa tried to summon her power, but nothing happened.

I can do anything I want. Anything at all.

Except she couldn't. She stood there rooted to the ground, as the angel continued with her beautiful voice.

"Are you a pawn? Or a queen?"

"Who are you?" Nissa screamed. She knew it could not be Emrakul, worlds away trapped in silver. It was just another illusion, another creation born of the magic and her own thoughts. "Just go away! Go!" Nissa bowed her head in agony, intense pain blossoming in her head. She closed her eyes, but the angel remained there in front of her clearly visible whether through eyes shut or open.

"Nissa Revane. Are you pawn or queen?"

"I . . . I don't know. I just want . . ."

"No!" The angel's voice turned cold and harsh. "It is the wrong question! Pawns, queens, they're all still pieces! All still pieces, waiting to be moved."

The angel put a hand to Nissa's chin. She gently tipped Nissa's head up, looking at her face. There was no love in that gaze, but the look comforted nonetheless. The pain in Nissa's head receded.

"Stop being a piece, Nissa. Be the hand that moves." There was a loud rumbling behind them. The angel looked over Nissa's shoulder, and something shifted in her eyes. Without word or farewell the angel soared into the sky, and was soon just a speck in the far distance.

A new voice boomed. **"Who makes a mockery of my trial? "**



Winds of Rebuke | Art by Mathias Kollros

Nissa looked up. A giant ibis stood in front of her, cloaked in blue robes with gold trim, a long bladed staff wielded in one hand. He shared the piercing, almost cruel stare of his statue in front of his temple. But this was not a statue. It was the god himself, Kefnet.

He did not look pleased.

Nissa had faced Eldrazi titans and demon mages, but never had she felt so overwhelmed by sheer power as she did in the presence of the ibis god.

Her thoughts, her very self, strained to remain coherent in front of Kefnet, a struggle as easy as a pile of leaves resisting a windstorm.

“Who are you, mortal?” Thoughts and memories plucked from her head without regard for her desire, leaving her mind scattered like dandelion seeds in a field. Struggle was useless. She sought to ride the windstorm, to come through on the other side.

“I see. And you think to come here? For answers?” Nissa could not read the god’s tone, could not read the god’s face, could not understand anything around her. All her focus was on preserving her coherence. She was losing the battle.

“I have an answer for you, mortal, one of the oldest answers. Knowledge is not a gift. It is earned. Only the worthy deserve knowledge.” Kefnet’s touch on her thoughts pressed. **“The unworthy deserve nothing. Dissolution is my kindness for you. Better nothing than ignorance.”**

She was breaking apart. “No . . .” was the only word she could muster. She thought of the evil of Nicol Bolas, of how he had corrupted Kefnet and the other gods, but as each thought arose it was mauled by Kefnet’s touch. He did not seem to know, or care, of Bolas’s blighted touch upon his essence.

Even now she could see through to the essence of the god, his essence made out of the world itself. The corrupted leylines of Amonkhet were the same strands of corruption in Kefnet, a strange melding of potency and virulence, inimical to Nissa’s desire for the natural beauty of a world. The leylines inside Kefnet were tiny fibers, bound together so tightly that it was easy to overlook them.

The God of Knowledge was made of leylines. Leylines she could manipulate.

Nissa frantically wove a spell in the seconds left to her. An infusion of magic burst from her hands, coating the leylines of Kefnet, seeping into their pockmarked surface. She guided her magic through the essence of Kefnet.

She remembered her witnessing of Bolas’s corruption of the gods, a dark helix in the night sky. She could not undo what he had done, but she used some of that knowledge to create a small pattern of her own making.

She saw the thread she wanted. She pulled it, and added a new fiber of mana to its mix.

The windstorm ceased. Kefnet stood there, unmoving, as Nissa’s thoughts returned to being solely her own. She took a deep breath, shaking, aware of just how close she had come to nothingness.

“You may go now, initiate. You have passed your trial.” The ibis god barely seemed aware of her as he flew off to some other destination.

Her spell had been broad, clumsy. Nissa was the merest amateur at manipulating a god. No, manipulation was far too strong of a word. She had merely altered him enough to no longer want to destroy her. And it had worked. She was still capable of breath and life and thought. *Thought. It is a gift. One that I need to use more.*

And though amateur she was, there was still a pattern of her own making residing in Kefnet. Still a thread she could tug . . . to what effect, she did not yet know. But she suspected there would be a time to find out. She was tired of being a pawn, constantly reacting to nightmares and failures, never ahead.

And perhaps even a queen was too small a destiny.

She heard a voice, her own voice, clear as a crystal bell.

“Be the hand that moves.”

Nissa dispelled the illusions around her. She was still standing in the same anteroom she had entered, this time empty of anyone but her. She pushed at the door back to the city, and it opened, a vista to the bright, dangerous world outside. She stepped through.