

Return to Dominaria: Episode 11

Martha Wells

From set *Dominaria*

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The sun was close to setting when the *Weatherlight* left the ocean and crossed over the coast into Urborg.

Gideon stood on the bridge with Liliana while Jhoira guided the ship over a swampland of bogs and weed-choked waterways bordered by thick green vegetation. Old ruins were buried under the vines and moss, some indication of the long history of this land.

They had already passed near an outer island, where Jhoira had sent her owl off on a brief scouting mission. When it returned, she explained grimly, "The monument to the fallen of the Phyrexian invasion was there. People used to go on pilgrimages to it, as a symbol of hope in terrible times. Rumor said Belzenlok had the Cabal deface it and from what my owl saw, the rumor is true."

"I heard about that, too." Teferi stood on the far side of the bridge, his arms folded and his gaze on the jungle swampland below. His mouth twisted in contempt. "Apparently the Cabal calls it the Fools' Tomb."

Liliana grimaced. "Well, my symbol of hope is that when the Blackblade rips Belzenlok apart and drains his life, the pain is unimaginable and everlasting."

Jhoira smiled. Teferi laughed and said, "I like the way you think, Liliana."

Liliana eyed him. "Don't make a habit of it; I'm a terrible person to know."

Gideon sighed, and she glared at him.

As the *Weatherlight* flew inland, the light gradually failed. The sky was dark with ash clouds from the volcanoes, and Jhoira turned the ship's running lights down to bare sparks. Gideon managed to spot the heavy shapes of monolithic Thran structures, but most of the ruins had the spiky organic look of Phyrexian remnants.



Swamp | Art by Titus Lunter

Some rose above the trees in great circular shapes, others had sharp lines left barely discernible under the vegetation. The broken walls and an occasional tower marked the sites of more recent cities and towns, destroyed and reclaimed by the plant growth. But for all the ruins, Urborg was far from uninhabited. Lights of all sizes gleamed under the trees and vines, flitting rapidly or moving with slow deliberation. Every clump of vegetation seemed to be a home for creatures constantly in motion.

The mood on the ship was sober as they passed over the dark landscape. Teferi and the others went below, though Karn remained out on the bow deck, keeping watch. Gideon stayed on the bridge with Liliana and Jhoira. He knew he should be resting in anticipation of their battle tomorrow, but he couldn't imagine trying to sleep right now. They were so close to their goal, so close to this last effort before they could turn all their attention to Nicol Bolas.

"You're sure these friends of yours will help us?" Liliana asked Jhoira, just a little skeptically. Earlier, Jhoira had sent her mechanical owl flying off across the swamps to deliver a message to her contacts here. "And not try to sell us to the Cabal as soon as they see us?"

Jhoira lifted a brow, but was clearly too used to Liliana by now to take offense. "I'm certain. I've been in contact with them since I decided to destroy the Cabal. There are plenty of humans living here who submit to the Cabal as a way to survive. But many others have fought and died trying to drive Belzenlok's forces off the islands. Now the resistance is concentrated in a secret hiding place. The people we'll be speaking to come from there."

"I'd heard something about the changes here, when I was making my own plans. Seeing it in person is quite different," Liliana admitted. "Of course, the more armies that died on this ground, the better. At least for our purposes."

"There's been so much death in Urborg. The panther warriors have been almost completely wiped out." Jhoira's expression was tinged with sadness. "And spirits and liches have built their own cities and towns throughout the swamps now."

"Spirits?" Gideon frowned. "Of the dead?"

“Yes, and pure manifestations of dark magic,” Jhoira explained. “The number and variety of undead here are almost infinite.”

“Then I should feel right at home,” Lilitia said drily.

Jhoira’s ironic expression showed she knew that wasn’t a joke. She added, “Most don’t care for the Cabal any more than we do, and they have to defend themselves against the nightmares created by the Cabal’s dementia magic—and other threats.” She leaned forward, peering into the mist and darkness. “My owl’s coming back.” Her expression went still as she communicated with her familiar. “And the resistance has agreed to meet with us.”



Jhoira’s Familiar | Art by Kev Walker

“Good,” Gideon said. He was ready to have this over and done with, and leave this strange land behind.

It was full dark when the *Weatherlight* came to a stop near a small city at the edge of a bog, half-buried under moss and overgrown trees. It had a stone wall and heavy gates, and was lit by a variety of colored lights. What Gideon could glimpse of the interior from the *Weatherlight*’s deck was odd in the extreme, with bridges stretching between strange architectural shapes and what looked like the campanile of a tower, lying on its side and forming part of a new structure.

The others stayed onboard while Gideon and Jhoira climbed down a ladder to the small clearing just outside the gates. Once they were down, a young Jamuraan man slipped out of the shadows. “This way,” he said, and led the way back through the brush.

Gideon was wary of going too far from the *Weatherlight*, but they only went a short distance to a shelter. It had been built where a large tree had fallen onto the curve of an old Phyrexian structure.

Four people waited there, sitting on a ground cloth in the light of a small cloud of glowing mist that floated nearby. Two were human, but the other two were panther warriors. They were tall, leanly muscled, with the heads and faces of the sleek predator cats they were named after. Everyone was heavily armed, and dressed in a mix of ordinary leather or metal armor and dark spike-covered garments obviously looted from the Cabal.

The female panther warrior motioned for them to come closer. “Jhoira. I’m Sayrah. You asked for our help.”

Gideon stayed on his feet, keeping guard like their guide, who put his back to the group and kept watch on the shadows under the trees. Jhoira took a seat and said, “Thank you for meeting with us.”

Sayrah tilted her head, and said with a touch of irony, “When we heard that Jhoira was here with a fabled skyship, it was hard to stay away.”

Jhoira didn’t waste time. “We’ve come here to attack the Stronghold.”



Cabal Stronghold | Art by Dimitar Marinski

Startled, Sayrah lifted one broad clawed hand. “If you’re here for warriors, there are too few of us to help you.”

“No, we won’t ask anyone else to fight this battle.” Jhoira leaned forward. “There are only two things I need. First, the clothing of a Cabal scout or fighter, someone who would be hunting Urborg for captives to take to the Stronghold’s fighting pit.”

“That we can easily do.” Sayrah gestured to the others, and one of the humans stood and slipped away through the dark. “And the other thing?”

“Information. Can you show us on a map where some of the last great battles were fought in Urborg?”

“Again, simple enough.” Sayrah opened her belt pouch and drew out a much-folded map.

Something moved in the brush and Gideon reached for his sword hilt. But the Jamuraan man said, “It’s all right. It’s a spirit from the town. They hate the Cabal and won’t betray us.”

The figure that moved out of the shadows was short and bulbous, with a flattened head and dark gray skin. It seemed to roll rather than walk, but Gideon could clearly see it had at least three legs. One eye swiveled to regard him as it passed by.

Slimefoot told its sprouts to stay below. This place was strange and in its own way even more threatening than the vast expanse of water they had just passed over. But there was something about it that seemed to call to Slimefoot, and it reluctantly climbed the steps to the deck. Arvad and Tiana stood near the ladders attached to the railing and the other humans were up on the bow deck.

Slimefoot stayed in the shadows near the bridge but edged over to the railing, drawn there by some strange impulse. It stretched to look down at the tangled greenery below.

In the darkness, glowing shapes moved through the undergrowth. Something said, *Who are you and where do you come from?*

Slimefoot replied, *I am Slimefoot, I come from the Weatherlight. Who are you?*

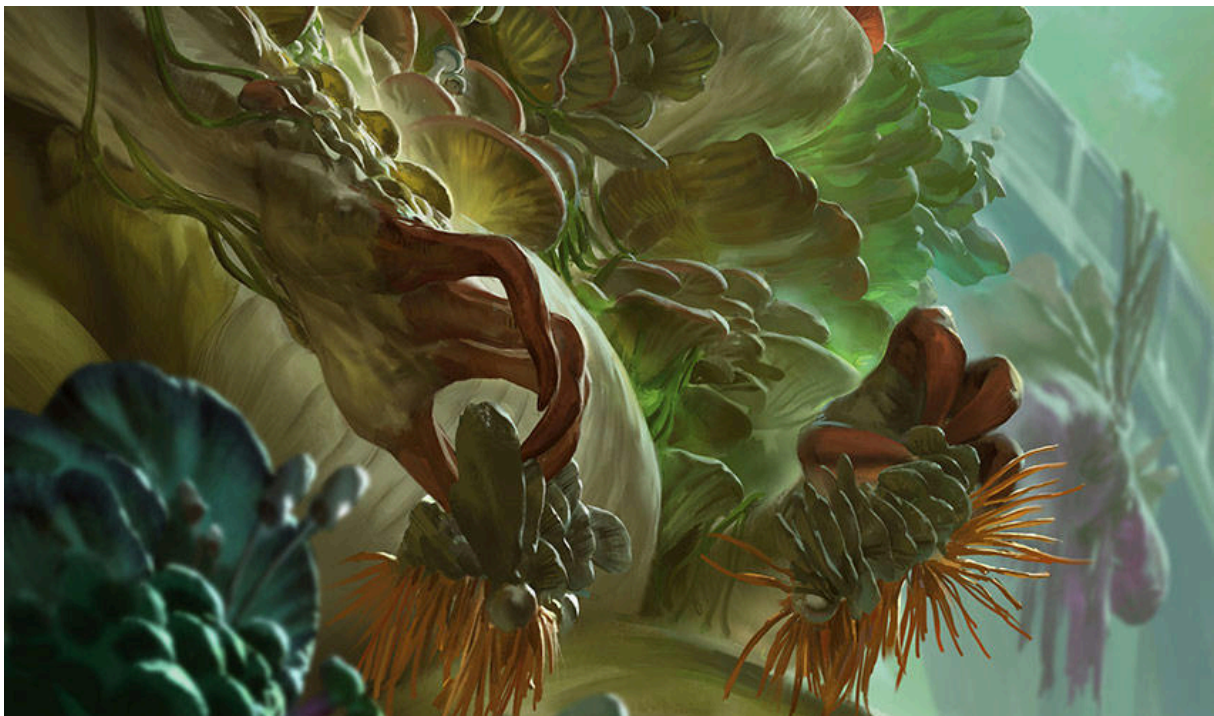
Yxarit and Iyrgrth and Syl-Stalker and —Slimefoot was overwhelmed by a torrent of names. *But what are you?* the voices asked. *You are like* —The words turned into images, scents. Bright green leaves warmed by a hot sun, flowers, rich damp earth.

Slimefoot said, *Yavimaya*. Raff had said that Slimefoot was from Yavimaya, and that it and its sprouts should go back there after they killed Belzenlok. Slimefoot wasn't sure about that. The *Weatherlight* was all it knew.

Iyrgrth said, *There is Yavimaya here, woven into the ground, from long ago. It came to fight*.

We came to fight the demon, Slimefoot said.

The demon, the demon, the voices whispered to each other, passing the word along. *Fight the demon*.



Fungal Plots | Art by Even Amundsen

Slimefoot settled in against the railing to talk to its new friends. It was good to be understood like this.

Before dawn the next morning, Gideon ducked his head into the open door of Chandra's compartment. "How is it going?"

“Almost ready,” Raff said. He was seated at the desk, paging through the arcane text he usually kept chained to his belt. He hadn’t bothered to remove the spell that made it weightless, so it was floating even with his face. On the far side of the room, Liliana and Shanna stood, contemplating Chandra critically.

Liliana said thoughtfully, “Maybe you should shave your head.”

Chandra scratched her scalp vigorously. “I kind of want to right now, after all the dirt you put in my hair.” She was in her disguise as a Cabal bounty hunter, wearing dark-colored pants and a tunic under black leather armor. The outfit had obviously come from a dead cultist, and was stained with blood and dirt.

Shanna disagreed. “Clerics shave their heads, we don’t want to draw that kind of attention. But she does need those scars.”

Raff pushed to his feet. “I’m ready, just had to check a few things. I learned this spell in the Academy, but I haven’t done it in a while. It’s an advanced exercise for illusionists.”

For once, Gideon didn’t think Raff was bragging. His expression was too intent, too preoccupied. Raff stepped close to Chandra and added, “Just hold still and look straight ahead.”

A faint light sparked around Raff’s fingers as he drew them down Chandra’s face. Her skin puckered and pulled, creating a sword scar that ran from one side of her forehead to her jaw. Gideon was impressed with the transformation. Raff stepped back and said, “How’s that?”

Liliana nodded in approval. “Perfect. She looks delightfully roguish.”

Shanna clapped Raff on the back. “Very good.”

Chandra touched the scar gingerly. “Whoa, that feels weird.”

Gideon said, “We need to get moving.” His own disguise had been much easier. He had taken off his armor and weapons, torn his clothes, rolled in the dirt at their last stop, and had Shanna punch him in the face a couple of times.

“Be right there,” Chandra said, as she wiggled into her weapons harness.

Gideon headed up the passage toward the stairs to the deck, Liliana following him. He asked her, “You’re ready as well?”

“More than ready.” She scrubbed her face with her hands. “I want this pact off my body. I want Belzenlok in pieces.”

“It’ll be over soon.” Gideon tried to sound reassuring.

Liliana’s expression was ironic. “One way or another.”

They climbed the stairs to the open deck, and a view of Urborg by dawn light.



Swamp | Art by Jonas De Ro

The sky was still clouded with ash and it made the morning light dim and gray. The misty copse of swampy forest beneath the *Weatherlight* seemed uninhabited, except for a half-buried ring-shaped Phyrexian structure. Gideon stepped to the railing where Karn stood beside Teferi, who watched something with a spyglass. Teferi lowered the glass and jerked his chin. “There it is.”

Gideon had seen the shape of the volcano last night, outlined against the dark sky, but now the walls of the Stronghold were visible as it stretched up from the caldera. It had been created as a Phyrexian base, then had been partially destroyed by an eruption when the Phyrexians were defeated. “Belzenlok has done some rebuilding,” Teferi commented. “Most of the tower was gone the last time I saw it.”

Gideon gauged the distance. “We’ve got a long walk ahead of us, but Shanna’s right, I wouldn’t want to risk taking the ship any closer.”

Gideon couldn’t read Karn’s expression, but somehow he didn’t think Karn was regarding the place with any concern. Karn said, “We should get started.”

Chandra and the others had come up on deck with Jhoira. Chandra now wore a Cabal sword across her back, with a long knife strapped to each thigh. “You look terribly frightening,” Teferi assured her.

“Thanks,” Chandra told him, smiling. “I know I smell terribly frightening.”

Teferi laughed. “I wasn’t going to mention that part.”

Jaya gave Chandra a clap on the shoulder. “Just remember, you’re prepared, and you can do it.”

Chandra grinned. “Thanks to you.”

As the others gathered, Jhoira said, “Be ready for our diversion. If it works, you should know immediately.”

“Oh, it’ll work all right,” Liliana said. She hesitated, regarding Gideon and Chandra. “Don’t get killed,” she said finally. “It’d ruin everything.”

Chandra snorted but Gideon told Liliana seriously, “We’ll be fine.” He knew her well enough by now to see she was genuinely worried, though her feelings were buried under layers of defensive sarcasm.

She wanted to be rid of her pact, she wanted vengeance against Belzenlok, but she also didn't want to see Gideon and Chandra hurt.

Arvad dropped one of the ladders over the side for them. Karn climbed down first and Gideon followed him, dropping the last few feet down to the soft moss-covered mud. It was warmer on the ground even though the ash-filled sky made the sunlight dim and gray. The high grass and vine-covered trees blocked the breeze, and insects buzzed around the mud and weed-choked pools.

Gideon stood beside Karn and kept watch until Teferi and Chandra climbed down to join them. As Karn took the lead and started away through the trees, Chandra said, "Well, here we go."

Gideon squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. "It will work," he said. It had to work.

She looked up at him worriedly. "So . . . you really think Liliana has changed?"

"I do," Gideon said honestly. He shrugged and smiled a little. "I'm just not sure she knows it."

Chandra's expression said she thought he was out of his mind.

As they wove their way through scattered ruins, Gideon thought the landscape seemed even stranger than it had at night. Karn pushed a path through clinging vines and thorny brush, testing the ground with his weight. With the sky so overcast, shadows clung to the undergrowth and little sparks of light fled away through the high grass as they passed.

After they had been walking some time, the ground dipped into a grotto and they spotted several of the spirit creatures gathered there, apparently having a meeting. With a gesture Teferi slowed time around the spirits, holding the group all but frozen until Gideon and the others were through the grotto and out of sight again. Jhoira had said the spirits didn't support the Cabal, but they had decided not to take chances. Little, glowing, flitting things, bigger than insects, followed them for a time, but nothing attacked.



Swamp | Art by Dimitar Marinski

They encountered an old tumbled-down stone wall and had to climb over it. As Gideon reached the top he spotted the outline of something that looked like a single great claw, buried in vines and roots, a remnant of whatever Phyrexian weapon had destroyed the stone structure.

“There sure are a lot of ruins,” Chandra said as she jumped down. “How many people lived here?”

“A great many,” Karn said, glancing down at her as he circled around the claw. “Our friend Venser lived here once.”

“The friend who gave you his spark?” Chandra asked, then winced. “Jhoira said—I know he died. I’m sorry.”

Teferi’s expression was sober. Karn nodded and said, “He was a good friend.”

Now that the silence was broken, Gideon decided to ask the question he had been thinking about since Yavimaya. “After Belzenlok is dead, will you—both of you—come with us to fight Bolas?”

Teferi glanced at him with a quizzical smile. “Into the trap, you mean?”

Before Gideon could reply, Chandra said, “Hey, at least this time we know it’s a trap!”

Teferi inclined his head, conceding the point. “I’ve fought Nicol Bolas before.”

Gideon was startled. “You did?”

“It was a very long time ago,” Teferi explained. “I lost spectacularly.”

“So did we, the last time we fought him,” Chandra admitted.

“That is not encouraging information,” Karn told her, but his voice held a trace of amusement.

Gideon said, “With Liliana at her full power, unrestrained by her pact, we can turn it into a trap for Bolas. We hope.”

Teferi shrugged. “One of the reasons I took my spark back was to come with you. I know Bolas, and I know his plans will include my home, sooner or later. And now that I have a daughter and grandchildren and great-grandchildren to worry about, I find my perspective has changed.” He clapped Karn on his metal shoulder. “What about you, my friend? Will you come with us?”

Karn said, “I need to take the Sylex to destroy New Phyrexia before the Phyrexians return to Dominaria.”

“The Phyrexians are trapped there,” Teferi pointed out. “You have all the time in the Multiverse to destroy them. As I—”

Karn interrupted, “Don’t make a time-related pun, please.”

Teferi chuckled. “All right, but you see my point.”

Gideon noted that Karn hadn’t said no. He prompted, “We could use your help, Karn. One more fighter might make the difference for us.”

Karn was silent for a time, as he made a path for them through some thick brush. “You believe the threat he presents is this urgent?”

Chandra wiped sweat off her forehead. “He did terrible things on Amonkhet. I don’t want to see that happen again anywhere. We’ve got to stop him.”



Damnation | Art by Zack Stella

Gideon agreed. “I’m not sure what his plans are, but I know we’re running out of time. And I know our next encounter with him has to be decisive.”

Teferi lifted his brows. “One way or another?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Gideon said.

Karn seemed to ponder it for a moment, then said, “I’ll consider your invitation.”

With a quick break for food and water from the pack Gideon carried, it took them the better part of the day to reach the approach to the Stronghold.

They stopped on high ground, where dirt and vegetation had partially covered the rubble of a huge ruined wall that was tall enough to give them a concealed vantage point. The sky was getting darker, a storm threatening somewhere above the ash clouds. But it was still light enough for a good view of the Stronghold.

It was as the Cabal agent in Tolaria West had described it. A long stone walkway bridged the old canals and moats that terraced the sloped ground in front of the volcano. The canals were now filled with muddy water and some extremely hungry scaled creatures, and the walkway was interrupted by walls with heavy gates, all well guarded by armored grinnants and robed clerics, where passwords and other proof of identity would be asked for. One side of the volcano had been carved down smooth, and the walkway led up to the towering half-circle wall built out from it. The gate through that wall was round, still bearing the spiked shape of some hopefully defunct Phyrexian weapon.

With the bulk of the black tower looming over them and the sky even darker with ash and smoke, the scene was daunting. Gideon was glad they didn’t have to fight their way through these defenses.

Gideon handed their supply pack to Karn, who shouldered it as Teferi said, “The spell should last more than long enough to get you through the gates. Once you’re where you need to be, find a place out of

sight, or at least in the shadows. When the spell ceases, there may be a pop of displaced air that could attract attention.”

“Got it,” Chandra said. She looked at Gideon. “Are we ready?”

Gideon thought they were as ready as they could get. After the long sweaty walk, they both looked even more the part of Cabal hunter and prisoner than they had on the *Weatherlight*. He asked Teferi, “Will we be able to see the spell from the inside?”

Teferi stepped back, smiling wryly. “Don’t worry, its effect will be obvious. Now, hold still.”

He held out a hand. Gideon instinctively braced himself, but he felt nothing. Then he realized Teferi and Karn had seemed to freeze in place, that the sound of the breeze through the leaves, the buzz of insects and birdcalls, had all abruptly stopped. Gideon looked at the Stronghold again and saw that all the armored figures at the various checkpoints now stood like statues.

Chandra met his gaze, brows lifted. “Wow, this is weird.”

Gideon had to agree. Then, though Teferi still appeared to be frozen, they heard his voice say, “Go now. A quick but even pace is best.”

“Right, let’s go,” Gideon said. Chandra took hold of his arm, and, careful to stay even with her, Gideon started down the slope. It took effort to step out of the tall grass and reeds, out into the open and the full view of the grinnants atop the low outer wall. But as Gideon and Chandra moved across the open ground toward the walkway, the world was silent and unmoving.

Teferi had explained the spell would create a zone of slowed time all around them, so, walking normally, they would be moving too fast for anyone inside the zone to see them. They reached the end of the walkway, the packed dirt turning to smooth dark paving stones under their feet.

The first wall was a Phyrexian structure that looked like the teeth of some large creature, so organic in appearance that it might have grown up out of the ground. It was draped with the Cabal’s red banners and the large metal gate across the walkway was at least twelve feet high.

Gideon and Chandra paused. “We can’t just open it, I guess,” Chandra said. “It’s bigger than our time bubble.”

Gideon wasn’t sure what would happen if they tried to push it open. Better not to find out. “We’ll climb it,” he said.

Careful to stay close together, they climbed the gate, the broad crosspieces making a good ladder. It was awkward, but Gideon reminded himself it would have been much harder with the Cabal grinnants shooting poison-tipped arrows at them. On the far side, they edged around the still forms of the guards and a scatter of floating dark orbs, the manifestation of a spell to trap intruders. “This could take longer than we thought,” Chandra said grimly, as they carefully picked their way across two trapdoors covered with metal spikes. “I hope Teferi gave us enough time. Ugh, I didn’t mean to make a pun.”



Stronghold Confessor | Art by Igor Kieryluk

“I know,” Gideon said. “Just keep moving.”

On the *Weatherlight*’s bridge, Liliana stood beside Jhoira while Tiana steered them low over the swamp. They headed to the area where one of the last battles between the panther warriors and the Cabal had taken place. “Though it was more like a massacre than a battle, from what I’ve been told,” Jhoira had said.

Liliana had told her, “For our purposes, a massacre is better.”

Now Jhoira leaned forward and told Tiana, “There’s a spirit town to the south, we want to be sure to avoid it.”

Jhoira didn’t want the Cabal to know the *Weatherlight* was here until they were ready. But Liliana could sense the presence of death ahead. Old death and cold rage. Many had died here, turning the trees and thick greenery into a charnel house, the plants feeding off the remains long ago rotted into the soil. The bones left behind cried out for vengeance. Liliana was more than willing to give it to them. She said, “We’re close enough. Stop here.”

Already reaching out to the unquiet dead below the *Weatherlight*, Liliana turned away to climb down the stairs to the deck.

She walked out into rising wind, heavy with the scent of ash and rainwater and incipient lightning. This undead army would be a distraction, an attack to disrupt the Stronghold while Gideon and Chandra searched for the Blackblade and used it to destroy Belzenlok. But if Liliana had her way, her army would also break the Cabal’s back in Urborg. The clerics and their death cultists would never recover from the blow dealt to them today.

She strode to the bow and stepped up onto the raised deck. As she lifted her arms, the lines of her pact glowed purple against her skin. “Hear me,” she whispered. “I call you to me, to lead you to revenge and the destruction of the Cabal.” The Onakke spirits in the Chain Veil whispered in her mind.

And in the grass and reeds and brush below, the dead stirred.

It seemed to take forever, but Gideon and Chandra made it past each checkpoint without having to open a gate or move anything that might betray their existence. It wasn't so much being caught that worried Gideon, since he knew they appeared to be moving far too rapidly for a cleric to even think about performing a spell to attack them. But he didn't want anyone to find altered doors or gates and decide to search the Stronghold for intruders.

As they finally walked through the open doors to the first hall, Chandra said in exasperation, "That was way harder than it looked like it would be."

"If you hadn't realized we could walk on the water in that third trap, we'd never have made it," Gideon told her.

"I wish I'd thought of it quicker," Chandra admitted as they stopped to get their bearings. The hall was huge and shadowy, the pillars supporting the ceiling curved inward so it was like walking into a giant's ribcage. Red banners had been hung from the ceiling and Cabal cultists slumped on the floor in huddled groups. A haze of smoke from incense burners hung unmoving in the air with the floating torches that inadequately lit the space. It was still easy to tell this huge chamber was alien, something created by the Phyrexians and repurposed by the Cabal. Chandra added, "We'd better get out of sight. Teferi's spell can't last for much longer."



Cabal Ritual | Art by Kieran Yanner

"Let's try to get further down, toward the fighting pit." Gideon led the way toward one of the openings at the side of the chamber, between two of the curving pillars. From questioning the Cabal agent, they knew roughly that the pit should be a few levels below this hall, and that the treasure vaults were near it. With Chandra disguised as a Cabal hunter and Gideon as her prisoner, brought to fight in the pit for the glory of Belzenlok and the entertainment of the cultists, they should be able to move relatively easily around the area. Once Liliana and the others arrived with their undead army, most of the Cabal forces would leave the Stronghold to fight, and Gideon and Chandra would have a chance to find the Blackblade and get to Belzenlok.

At least, that's how they hoped it would happen.

Past the hall they found a large corridor supported by the curved riblike pillars. *An esophagus rather than a ribcage*, Gideon thought wryly. It was lit by more torches floating in the air, but its twists and turns made for many shadowy alcoves. They found one near a broad staircase leading down, temporarily empty of any Cabal cultists or guards. Gideon thought the light from the nearest torch might be starting to flicker. He turned to Chandra and held out his arms. "Hurry, I think the spell is nearly finished."

Chandra fastened the chains around Gideon's wrists. "Does that hurt?" she asked him worriedly.

"It's fine," he assured her. The light flickered again, and they both braced themselves.

Slowly, the silence around them filled like water poured into a bowl. Voices first, echoing in from the entry, chanting Belzenlok's titles over and over again. *Demonlord, King of Urborg, Lord of the Wastes, Scion of Darkness*. Then distant moans, screams, metal banging, shouts. The torches flickered and black-robed Cabal cultists ran down the hall, armored grinnants following them.

Gideon and Chandra exchanged a grim look, then started toward the stairway.

Jhoira came up on deck with Shanna to watch Liliana raise the army of undead.

The ash-choked sky was even lower, thunder rumbling somewhere distant. Below the *Weatherlight*, figures stirred in the grass and brush. They were the remnants of panther warriors, their bones clothed with shadows of the flesh they had once inhabited. Their weapons were rusted swords and spears that had been left buried under the mud, or clubs and rocks gathered from the ground. They formed groups, clusters, recreating the formations they had used to fight their last battle. They had fought the Cabal as long as they were able, and this swamp was a mass grave of their army.

"There are hundreds of them," Shanna said, leaning over the railing. Raff and Arvad stood on the other side of the deck with Jaya, watching warily. The thallid came up the stairs, stood there a moment, then sent its babies hurriedly back down the steps.

A dozen dark shapes appeared over the bow rail and Shanna reached for her sword. Jhoira caught her arm. "No, I think they're liches, called by Liliana."

As they crouched on the rail, their forms solidified into panther warriors. They still bore the wounds that had killed them, great bloodless slashes that had cut through their armor into their chests and arms. Shanna let go of her sword hilt but watched them warily. "This is strange," she commented.

"It'll get stranger before we're done," Jhoira told her.

Liliana spoke to the undead warriors in a soft tone, and the panthers replied. Jhoira could hear the words, but it was like listening to a language she couldn't understand. Then Liliana turned to say, "They're ready. They'll follow the ship into battle."

"Good," Jhoira breathed. She pushed back from the rail. The long wait was finally over; they would face the Cabal head on. "Raff, go tell Tiana to take us—"

"Jhoira!" Arvad called out.

Jhoira turned, and her eyes widened. Rising out of the swamp in the distance was a huge creature. A mottled dark green, its head was easily half the size of the *Weatherlight*, surely too big for the distorted, long-limbed body clawing out of the mud and trees. The wide slash of its mouth opened to split the head in half and reveal a fanged maw like a cavern.

Shanna shouted, “Liliana, is that thing yours?”

In the bow, Liliana cursed, sounding more annoyed than startled. “I didn’t call that thing! And whatever it is, it’s not dead.”

Jhoira murmured, “When I said it would get stranger, I didn’t mean this.” She drew on her power, pulling defensive spells together out of light and air.

Raff ran to her side, staring at the creature. “Uh. If we knew what it was, maybe—”

Jhoira glanced back. “Liliana—”

The panther liches had leaned down to whisper to Liliana again. She translated, “It’s called Yargle. It was created when Belzenlok transformed some idiot called Yar-Kul into a maggot, which was eaten by a frog, which turned into that.” She waved a hand in frustration. “And that was not at all helpful!”

“Do they know how to kill it?” Shanna asked.

Liliana grimaced. “No. It’s what killed all of them.”



Yargle, Glutton of Urborg | Art by Jehan Choo

Jhoira set her jaw. “This thing is not going to stop us.” But it was going to delay them. Gideon and Chandra would be trapped in the Stronghold expecting the *Weatherlight* to arrive at any moment.

Then Yargle roared and flung itself at the *Weatherlight*.

Gideon was tense with waiting. He and Chandra stood just outside the arena around the fighting pit. Through the huge curved archways, the chanting praises to Belzenlok grew louder and louder, almost drowning out the clash of weapons and screams from the pit.

“They should have been here by now,” Chandra said under her breath. “Something’s gone wrong.”

That was what Gideon was afraid of. They had moved twice, trying to find inconspicuous places to wait, but the corridors and halls around the arena were becoming more crowded with cultists and clerics as they flooded in to watch their prisoners murder each other in the fighting pit. The entrance

to the Cabal's treasure vaults, where their information said the Blackblade was kept, was nearby, so Gideon didn't want to retreat. But it was becoming harder not to get swept up in the crowd and pulled into the arena.

Either something had gone wrong with Liliana's attempt to raise an undead army, or worse, something had attacked them. *They could be here any moment*, Gideon reminded himself. Then the cultists would be called to arms and the whole place would clear out as they ran to the outer defenses. *All we have to do is wait* —

A crowd of cultists surged into the corridor and Chandra was shoved forward. Gideon tried to use his chains to brace her, but hands pushed him from behind and they stumbled into the arena with the crowd.

They came out onto a broad open walkway that ran along the edge of the pit. The screams and clashing of arms were much louder, though Gideon couldn't see into the pit from here. Hundreds of cultists stood on the ledges around the huge chamber, chanting a hymn. Torches floated above the pit and red banners hung from the curved ceiling. Chandra looked around for a way out, but Gideon was tall enough to see the path to the nearest archway was blocked by the crowd.

"Whisper comes," the cultists around them were chanting. "Whisper calls us to the pit."

A red-robed cleric swept in as the crowd parted for her. Cultists dropped to the floor so she could use their backs to step up to a raised platform. Evil radiated off her like a miasma as she raised her arms, letting her robe drop back. "The Demonlord approaches!"

Gideon swore under his breath. The chanting intensified and huge doors rumbled at the far end of the arena. The torches flared, and out of the shadows appeared a massive demonic shape. Belzenlok. He spread his wings and basked in the chants and screams of the cultists, the firelight glinting off his pale skin. His body was strong and muscular, his head heavy with curving horns. He strode forward and sat on the throne-like stone structure at the end of the arena. He gestured and Whisper bowed deeply to him. As she straightened up, she shouted, "Into the pit, for the glory of Belzenlok!"



Whisper, Blood Liturgist | Art by Kieran Yanner

All around the arena, hunters and cultists shoved captives over the edge into the pit. As Whisper turned, her gaze fell on Gideon and Chandra. “You, send him in! Unless you want to die here with him?”

Chandra started to look up at Gideon, and he knew that was a mistake they couldn’t make. He jerked away from her and said under his breath, “Push me into the pit.”

“Gideon—” she protested.

“Do it. We need to buy more time.” Whisper was watching them like a predator scenting prey. “Now!”

Chandra shoved him, and Gideon pretended to stagger, then tumbled backward into the pit.