

Note for a Stranger

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On the exterior wall of an inn in Precinct Five on the city-plane of Ravnica hangs the Traveler's Noticeboard, warded from rain, time, and those lacking a planeswalker's spark. The bulletin board hangs in a private space in the public square, sheltered by a nest of ivy and the charitable shade of the inn's clay tile roof. It's difficult to catch someone in the act of posting on the board, since so few can see it, and fewer still bother to walk all the way to Precinct Five, but if someone were to approach, they'd find a broad stretch of cork and the earthy musk of a distant and damp rainforest. Scattered as seeds across the board are dozens of requests, warnings, love letters, search warrants, bounties, lovingly sketched pictures, poorly drawn portraits, and all manner of notes and notices, each placed by the rarest of travelers.

The notes range in usefulness. On parchment, hanging dead center:

TWO EXTRA TICKETS: Championship Singles Match, Valor's Reach, next planar quarter-moon. Leave planar contact address below if interested!!

Just to the right, on the back of a menu:

LOST: Tie clip—silver beetle. Last seen Whisperers encampment, Qal Sisma mtns, Tarkir. Return at once, will trade 20 units of Halo. Leave under violin case, 187 S 14th St, New Capenna

On an old sheet of paper torn by years of weather, in a haphazard and bold scrawl:

FOR A GOOD TIME, 44 TOFANA PLAZA, PALIANO, FIORA

But on a warm amber morning in early summer, a fresh note is stuck with a slim silver pin near the top:

Seeking raw copper.

Will trade currency of choice in exchange for discretion.

—R

Here, at the Traveler's Noticeboard, the planeswalker Huatli stands, feet firmly planted, chin tipped up out of equal parts confidence and short stature, and skims the board because *why not*. Her eye is caught by the fresh note up top, and she remembers the raw copper brought from Ixalan to trade when she first arrived on this plane.

In the square behind her, linden trees brighten in verdant praise and dandelions and clover punch through the cobblestones, the rubble of the city's recent sorrows cleared away at last.

Not one to leave a stranger in want, Huatli rises on her tiptoes to snag an old piece of paper from another corner of the board and responds in a loopy and flourished hand. Thus begins their correspondence.

Is there an appropriate location to trade if interested?

—H

Write your initial on the box below the bulletin board. Your signature has been encoded into the warding.

—R

“Seems like overkill,” Huatli murmurs to no one in particular. She looks down. Sure enough, at her feet is a silver box tied to the post with a delicate metal chain. Huatli taps it with the steel of her toe. Yes. Must be that box.

She kneels, a little uncertain she’s doing this right, and uses her index finger to draw a quick H on the lid of the box. It silently slides open, revealing an empty space inside.

“Uh “

Feeling slightly reassured by this development, Huatli places a medium-sized lump of Sun Empire copper inside, along with a quick inquiring note.

Are you a spy?

—H

She seals the box, only realizing after it’s shut that she forgot to mention what currency she wanted in return. Huatli says a word she once heard Angrath use and draws the H on top of the box again.

It remains closed.

It isn’t until she returns the next day and tries again that the box reopens, a fresh note inside.

I am a very authentic spy.

Also you forgot to mention how I should pay you.

—R

Huatli smiles. Whoever the spy is, they’re cheeky.

Attention: Secret Agent R,

As a very authentic secret agent, what inspired you to become a tool of the state? What honor do you find in the shadows? What enriches the soul of a warrior who hides who they are? Most importantly, what kind of garotte do you intend to craft out of my copper?

I await your encoded transmission, Agent R.

Also not a secret agent,

—H

P.S. I am a woman of honor and do not need compensation in exchange for the goods I gift in the spirit of altruism.

The next morning brings a new note from the mystery writer that draws her smile wider, eliciting a laugh and a thrill in her heart.

Not A Secret Agent,

I had to ask my colleague what a garotte was and regret doing so.

Down to business. I will not press the issue of payment again. I appreciate your generosity—you are inadvertently helping me right a tremendous extraplanar wrong.

That said you caught me. I don't think I would make a very good spy anyway. Being a "tool of the state" sounds like it isn't very fun. I think I would need to get better at lying first. What gave me away—was it saying I was a very real spy? I thought that would be good cover, alas.

Your copper will not be used to make a garotte, I promise, but it is a critical conductor I'm integrating into a project I'm crafting for a friend! That part is actually real. Truly. Seriously. I'm a lady, not a liar.

You write beautifully, by the way. What brings you to this plane, or are you a local?

—R

Huatli spends the next day with a light heart, pleased her assumption was correct. "I'm a lady." She spends the day reading and rereading the letter, privately beaming in victory. *Bullseye*.

She skips from consultation to consultation, from the Azorius legislative records to a long meeting with the sub-lieutenant of the Boros. All the while she can't stop thinking of R, her spy-that-isn't-a-spy.

After an afternoon of trying to contain herself, she returns to the box and leaves her response.

Lady, Not A Liar,

I've spent the last two months on this plane studying the executive structure of the guilds. My home's governmental system is quite different, but I've found in my years there is always something to learn from others. (I now realize, am I a tool of the state?! How embarrassing.) I hope to bring back learnings to help my own home improve.

Perhaps that is naive. Ravnica's government was founded magically, shaped by a foreign planeswalker's hand; it seems designed to spur conflict but functions all the same. I'm not convinced the guild's executive structure is superior to our own, but one can glean inspiration in many surprising sources.

I think of the war and conflict back home and wonder if there is something better. Maybe as a former fake spy you have some insight into how to end conflict. Is it naive to seek utopia?

—H

Seeker of Utopia,

Utopia, hm? I've heard my own home described that way! The point of utopia is that it is impossible, but then again, the point of the impossible is to always strive for it anyway, yes? Nothing is ever finished—that's what I was taught. My mentor's inability to be impressed has led me to be the kind of creator who can't ever put down my tools and call it a day. Is that why you seek to learn from other planes? Do you wish to perfect your own home, even if you know the work will never be completed?

I don't think you're naive. I think it's beautiful you want to make your home a better place.

Former Fake Spy,

—R

R,

The least we can do in this life is try. The more I learn how everyone else strives for perfection, the more I can help my home.

You speak of your mentor with warmth but describe what strikes me as cruel treatment. If this box we're using is proof of your genius, I am angry on your behalf that your mentor was unimpressed with your work. It is truly remarkable.

You should be proud to make such beautiful things.

—H

H,

I'm flattered that you rush to defend my honor! Please don't assume bad faith—my mentor always encourages me to grow and improve. She means the world to me, as do your kind words.

What do you know of Dominaria? I've been staying there and returning to Ravnica for supply runs. I don't know you, but I think you'd like it.

Perhaps you could meet me there sometime?

Yours,

—R

Huatli's heart catches in her throat as she reads that morning's missive. By reflex, she defaults to formality.

Dear R,

All I know of Dominaria is gossip of ancient and careless men. I trust your judgment, though. If you say it is beautiful it must be a place to be cherished! I would like to see it and meet you in person, if you are amenable.

—H

A response doesn't come for two days.

Huatli worries she did something wrong. Until one morning in her box by the noticeboard

H,

Let's cut to the chase. I'm interested, you're interested. Want to meet up for a drink?

Yours if you like,

—R

Huatli doesn't have a heart attack, but comes close. She responds instinctually, shamelessly, with a reflex of over-the-top poetry—

R,

You lunge when I dip, and your forward strike has struck me plain and kindled the blush of my cheeks.

All I want is to grow my home into the paradise it could be. Maybe paradise is something we can pursue together.

I'll be at Iveta's Tavern tomorrow at moonrise. Please accept my charity and let me buy you a drink.

—H

H,

You make me feel like a teenager. I wish I could write as artfully as you. Yes, I will be there.

We can start in Ravnica, but let's travel somewhere fun for dinner. I know a fascinating place for a second round in Park Heights! Have you been to New Capenna? It's my favorite to visit on holiday—there's this beautiful dance hall we can check out. You've never seen so much gold in your life! Sometimes there are fights, but it is very safe, I promise. Amazing drinks, amazing fashion, great people-watching, and very fast dancing! I hope that isn't intimidating. We can meet at Iveta's for round one and planeswalk from there?

Come dance with me, H,

—R

This time, Huatli can't contain her flattered gasp. She spends the rest of the day trying not to burst in anticipation. R said yes. And suggested a second location? With dancing? Huatli's mind spins. How fast is fast dancing? What is it fast in comparison to? Are there variable permitted speeds to the dancing? *Is it partner dancing?!* Huatli cancels her appointments and spends the stretch of afternoon pacing her apartment trying to choose what to wear, anxiously checking the sky to see if the sun has set any faster.

As the afternoon stretches to evening, Huatli anxiously dives into her traveling trunk. A second location requires potential layers. Does she bring a bag? Does she put her overnight items in that bag?! Huatli does not hyperventilate, but she does panic-write several lines of lover's poetry in a moment of fervent ardor just in case.

When evening finally arrives, warm and thick and perfumed with creeping summer jasmine, Huatli pins her braids in place, clasps her summer jacket, and heads onto the street with a broad smile. Somehow, her fluttering heart manages to remain behind her ribs.

The last thing she expects is the familiar face she spots across the pavement in the Tenth District.

"Saheeli?" she calls in disbelief.

The woman across the street pauses, then squeals, a happy noise that carries across the cobblestones. The other pedestrians take no notice; the strangeness of strangers is a mundane fact of life in a city-plane.

Saheeli wears a rainproof wrap over a bright azure sari, and she nearly slips on the rain-soaked pavement as she bounds over to Huatli. "I didn't recognize you without the armor!"

Memories flock Huatli's mind. She remembers her first planeswalk, those few happy days when she first met Saheeli. She hadn't stayed long, but it was long enough that she fantasized often of going back

Huatli holds her arms out and poses. "Do I look like a real Ravnican now?"

"You're smiling, that's how I know you're not from here," Saheeli teases.

Huatli's eyes are pulled to sky and the impatient path of the moon. It's getting late. R will be waiting for her.

"What are you doing here?" Huatli asks. She angles a foot away as she leans forward, her body torn between which woman to seek.

Saheeli notices. Crosses her arms. "I'm just passing through. I loved meeting you in Kaladesh, hanging out for a few days. I hope I helped make your first planeswalk a good one, Huatli."

Something in Huatli's heart sinks. She enjoyed that, too, but the time was brief. Life and its commitments got in the way, and Huatli never had the chance to tell Saheeli she was interested.

For a moment Huatli realizes she can tell Saheeli now, here.

Huatli pauses.

Nearly does.

But the glimpse of the moon behind the other woman reminds her now is not the time. R is waiting for her. Huatli shivers. *Come dance with me, H.*

She finds her words. "I had fun, too. Glad you liked learning about dinosaurs." She grins but can't help noticing Saheeli's closed-off stance. The moon creeps over the rooftops.

"I have to go," Huatli adds, interrupting whatever Saheeli was about to say.

"Oh! Got it!" Saheeli says instead. "Let's catch up sometime?"

Huatli's already turned away when she yells "Sure yes!" over her shoulder, as if that were a sentence.

She races the ascent of the moon.

Her footsteps splash through the puddles, the street reaching out ahead of her as a racetrack, the creep of the stars egging her on. She turns a sharp left, a broad right, weaving through the Tenth toward Iveta's Tavern like steel toward a lodestone. The evening crowd begins to fill the streets with leisure and laughter. Restaurants spill customers into the walkway, and a flock of birds fly under the bridge she races over.

There.

Huatli slows and calms herself before walking through the door to Iveta's. The tinkle of a bell heralds her arrival.

Iveta's Tavern is cool relief from the summer heat, its walls adorned with hung fabrics and elaborate paintings, a great mirror hanging above the counter at the back. Huatli sees herself in the reflection, tentatively pleased with how her outfit turned out. She notices fresh-cut flowers in vases on the tables, smells how they perfume the room and mingle with the scent of yeast and memories of sugar. The roof is low, its wooden floors lovingly bookmarked with history. There are two other couples in the tavern, no single customers at the tables. Huatli sighs in relief. She didn't keep R waiting.

Huatli quickly orders two coffees (and, in a panic, two additional glasses of wine, uncertain what R will constitute as a first round) and takes a seat, cautiously carrying all four beverages at once, settling into her chair.

She proceeds to die, silently, over and over and over, as she waits for a woman she has never met to walk through the door.

Her anticipation is punctured when a face her heart knows well enters to the sound of the bell.

Saheeli.

Huatli gasps. Did Saheeli follow her here?

Their eyes lock in mutual surprise and the realization hits them in tandem. And as Saheeli approaches, the truth spills from the two women at once.

"H is for Huatli."

"R is for Rai."

They stare at one another, entranced.

Mesmerized.

A moment charged with the kind of magic neither could wield.

Huatli's concentration tunnels. The rest of the tavern doesn't exist. The Multiverse compresses, impossible and close, charged and precious. All of the planes have collapsed in this one moment into the woman standing in front of her table.

Saheeli, shining in perfect cobalt, eyes sparkling with a wild fascination, sinks into the seat across from Huatli and glances at the four drinks between them.

Huatli explains, softly, stunned, "I panicked."

A warm, playful smile illuminates Saheeli's face. She reaches forward through the thicket of stems and cups and gently skims her fingers over the back of Huatli's hand. Their eyes meet as Saheeli whispers, "It's perfect."

Huatli bursts with confession. Saheeli laughs, reciprocates, laments, and laughs again. A shared joke of secret identities, their tiny table a private utopia. Part of Huatli registers the other patrons still in the tavern, and she thrills in the act of feeling observed. Are they jealous, she wonders, at the miracle in front of her?

Their conversation is effortless. Everything is easy with her.

They share one of the coffees on the table, Saheeli saying they'll need it for the dancing. She rises, and Huatli follows, drawn with the weight of serendipity and the promise of the night.

One pulls the other toward the door, leaving coins on the table behind them, entwining their hands as they do. The warrior-poet's fingertips explore an artisan's calluses as their lips gently and tentatively meet under the indigo reach of Ravnica's sky, and the two women depart the moonlight of one plane to emerge under the brilliant stars of another.



Heartbeat of Spring | Art by: Peo Michie