
Episode 2: Omens

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From set *Tarkir: Dragonstorm*
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Elspeth was accustomed to being stared at. She was equally familiar with being barraged by awed questions and desperate prayers. The sight of an archangel had a habit of inspiring such things. But she wasn't used to a small child clinging to her wings and asking,

"Are you a dragon?"

She blinked lambent eyes at the round and unfrightened face peering up at her.

"A dragon?"

"You have wings—" started the child as somewhere in the distance, a woman let out a scandalized yelp: the mother, presumably. Elspeth took absent note of the fact no one else on the skyship had come to interrogate her about her presence, not after she explained to a flustered dignitary that she was here to see Narset, *please*, and was cordially told to make herself at home until the waymaster could be retrieved. Whatever else Narset's people—the Jeskai, supplied a memory—were, they at least were polite. "And you have *four other limbs*," the child continued. There was something fussy about the way she spoke the phrase, like someone being coerced into allowing use of their best crockware and now watching vigilantly to prevent damage. "That means you're a dragon."

Elspeth considered this. "Does it?"

The child nodded.

The accusation made a kind of tilted sense. Elspeth had heard stories of how alien the dragons of Tarkir were, how variable in form they'd become. Perhaps, it was just simpler for the parents in this plane to caution their offspring that everything with four limbs and two wings was a dragon; a blanket warning to keep children from investigating strange noises in the dark.

Except there was real fear in the woman's face as she came racing up to Elspeth, hands clutching for her daughter's shoulders.

"My apologies," she said, imposing herself between Elspeth and the child. The latter herded behind the woman despite her loud protestations.

"Mama, I want to talk to the dragon lady."

"My daughter hasn't learned her manners yet. Please do not take anything she says as an offense."

Elspeth stretched out a mailed hand and was faintly surprised when the woman cowered away. In her previous life, she might have laughed or tried harder to reassure the pair. Since her ascendance, however, every impulse felt muted, insignificant, dwarfed by an instinct toward doing what was right. And what was right for the woman was giving her the mercy of distance. It was clear all she wanted was to get away from Elspeth, to run as far as the ship would permit her.

"No offense was taken," Elspeth folded her wings tight against her back and dipped her chin, hoping the woman would find some comfort in her cool formality. "May you go with the blessings of what gods you worship."

That earned the archangel an odd look. The woman flashed her an uncertain smile before she spooned her daughter up into a one-armed embrace and draped her over the shoulder like a sack of rice, backing away from Elspeth once she was certain the girl was secure. Four strides into her retreat, the woman turned and broke into a trot. The archangel could hear them arguing as they went.

"But the dragon lady, Mama."

"For the last time, she's *not* a dragon—"

"If she's not a dragon," howled the child triumphantly, having caught out her mother with indomitable logic, "why can't I talk to her?"

"*Because I could be wrong!*"

Their voices died into the background chatter. The pearly light emitting from Elspeth was chillier in hue than the glow from the trails of lanterns suspended in the air. They bobbed with the wind, untethered to anything. Finally alone, Elspeth stood and studied the skyship. It might have been a temple once or even a series of them—at least before disaster struck. Whatever had happened wasn't enough to deter the Jeskai from making use of the ruins. Roofed structures—the curved eaves sky-blue and ornamented with gold, striated in places with cracks or signs of repair—were carefully stacked along the bow of the massive vessel. At their summit hung a massive beacon the color of cinnabar. There were monks everywhere, some laden with scrolls, others traversing the topsails, attending to the rigging, swabbing the deck; they moved with a practiced acrobatic efficiency and even as she was now, displaced from mortal concerns, Elspeth found them a pleasure to witness.



Art by: Leon Tukker

“Elspeth Tirel,” came a voice from behind her. “We have never met, but I know you by reputation, just as you know me by the same. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. We’ve shared many friends in common.”

She turned to see a woman enrobed in the same blue and white palette as the monks, only her garments were more elaborate and embellished. Her expression was calm but otherwise inscrutable, her smile perfunctory.

“I am Narset, waymaster of the Jeskai. I believe you were seeking me.”

Elspeth did not waste time on empty courtesies. “Dragonstorms have begun appearing throughout the Multiverse. I’ve come to ask how Tarkir has kept them at bay.”

Narset’s expression adjusted to one of faint concern.

“I am afraid that you might have come for nothing then,” said Narset, already moving to the cabin, fingers crooked to gesture Elspeth forward. “Please. Follow me to my study. We need to consolidate our knowledge of the dragonstorms. I have a suspicion things are far worse than either of us could have imagined.”

Though Narset knew the Jeskai conventions of hospitality, she was unsure about the correct protocol when one’s guest was an archangel. Elspeth, as far as Narset was aware, hadn’t always been a celestial being; she’d been human once, although from all accounts, she possessed the same rigorous values then that she had now. With a pang, Narset thought again of Ajani and how fond he’d been of Elspeth,

of her devotion to what was right, her compassion and her commitment to defending those who could not do so themselves.

She thought of Tamiyo and her story circle, the moonfolk woman's appetite for learning everything, no matter how trivial the anecdote. She was the first one to speak of Elspeth and her courage. Narset hoped her friends—what else did you call people who you'd sit and share stories with, listen to for hours, drinking up every tale they offered?—were well. Since her spark guttered out, she could no longer walk the Blind Eternities, something that had felt like loss at first and then a relief. She had justification now to think of Tarkir and only Tarkir, to put all of herself into the work of rehabilitating her ravaged home. Nonetheless, she missed them, those other Planeswalkers, those rare few who understood what it was like to not entirely belong, to long for more than flesh and tradition could ever aspire to.

"Tamiyo would have been glad at our meeting, here," said Elspeth. The light from her was like something from a dying candle.

"Yes, she would have," said Narset, surprised at how raw her voice was. "And Ajani, too."

"It cost everything to bring him and Nissa back. The life of a woman. The spark from a living Planeswalker, and the spark from a dead one. Ajani, he—I think sometimes he'd have preferred—"

The words died in her throat.

"At his heart," said Narset slowly, the silence barbed with hurt. If either of them were careless, they'd cut themselves open on the past. "He only ever wanted peace."

"Yes."

An awkward quiet settled over them, heavy as bloodied silk, the two separated by the island of Narset's desk. She had protested its grandeur, saying she needed nothing but space enough for her inkpots and scrolls, textbooks and untranslated volumes, but the other stewards insisted: the Jeskai needed a new symbol, and, as waymaster, it was her duty to serve. As such, she required the right trappings, and that began with a sufficiently officious-looking desk.

"Earlier, you said things might be worse than either of us could have imagined."

"The dragonstorms in Tarkir have become considerably more potent," said Narset, glad for the change of topic. Grief was so complicated to navigate. She knew farmers who disdained sympathy and preferred a no-nonsense delivery of bad news but also warriors as fragile as blown glass who wept like children when told a loved one had passed. Narset couldn't tell where Elspeth fell on that spectrum. Worse, she was sure the archangel would look askance at the Jeskai's apathy toward any concept of an afterlife. Then again, she might not. Ajani had said—

Narset shook her head. *Focus*, she reminded herself, trying not to think of how she'd had to learn secondhand of Ajani's arrival in Tarkir and of how many days she'd spent waiting for the leonin warrior to reach out, reconnect.

Had he thought her callous because of this?

Had she failed him?

"So much so, they've begun to reshape Tarkir itself," Narset removed a map from its scroll case and unfurled it across her desk. The parchment was mottled with annotations: notes she'd made across recent months. "Some places have seen elevated water levels, others sinkholes, even new geological formations. That unto itself would be concerning, as it has worrying ramifications for the local ecosystems, but look here, here, and here."

Narset pointed to three spots on the map, each heavily circled in ink.

“Our Mardu contacts say there are places in the steppes that have begun to grow scales.”

“Scales? As in, the land itself—”

“No, no, nothing is coming alive.” Narset thought on this for a moment. “*Yet*. Although according to reports, there are now oxen with reptilian eyes and cats growing wings. I don’t know how much of this is apocryphal, but one thing is for certain: there are primordial forces in play here. Something as powerful as Ugin.”



Art by: Leon Tukker

“Except Ugin is gone,” said Elspeth.

Narset nodded. “And Bolas is dead. In theory, it’s possible this could be the work of some other elder dragon of their level, but Ugin believes all his kin to be dead.” She drew a thin breath. “It has something to do with Ugin’s departure, I am sure of it. His presence catalyzed, if not outright created, the original storms. However, according to all of our records, they never exceeded a certain intensity until he was incapacitated. Therefore, it stands to reason that he served as a metaphysical ballast somehow, keeping the plane in check—”

She caught herself, staunched the torrent of words with a swallowed noise of frustration. Elspeth had asked for none of Narset’s theorizing, and, so, she wouldn’t subject her guest to such: this was decorum, or, at least, that was what Narset had been told.

“Either way,” said Narset, smoothing her voice into nonchalance. “The dragonstorms would be manageable problems if not for the fact they have been producing more dragons, each of them larger,

stronger, and hungrier than the last. We had learned how to fight the old broods ... but these new dragons defy everything we knew."

"What if the solution lies in the ritual you used?" said Elspeth. "It is possible that all we need to do is modify—"

"I can't," said Narset, voice fraying. "I won't. You don't understand. The ritual—"

She had kept her explanation of what had transpired in Tarkir and her role in the revolution as bareboned as possible: half because Narset was sick to death of hearing her own paeans, half because there was grief enough at their table without her adding more. A small, childish part of her had worried they'd break under the weight of it all. But perhaps she should have elaborated. It'd have made this part easier.

"The ritual," repeated Narset. "It did more than summon the spirit dragons. It—" How to put into words what she herself barely comprehended? It seemed gauche, irresponsible somehow. "As best as I understand it, it may have destabilized the delicate balance in Tarkir, resulting in a chain reaction."

"And you're afraid that history would repeat itself if you were to provide assistance." Always that same affectless calm.

"Correct. It would be different if I had Ojutai—"

The past and its thrice-damned thorns. Narset flinched at how easily she invoked the dragonlord, for all that he was anathema to the Jeskai these days. Luckily, Elspeth's face remained vacant of any judgment. Then again, it seemed to carry no expression at all save for a calm like cold steel.

"Tarkir suffers, but the plane is at least familiar with the forces at work here. The clans have their contingencies, their defenses. I don't want to think about what's happening elsewhere, in a world with very different rules and no way of protecting itself if the worst happens," Narset shook her head. "There are too many possibilities, none of which are good and I—"

Whatever else she might have said was eaten up by the loud splintering noise of a crash and a low urgent knelling: a warning that something was amiss. Elspeth and Narset jolted onto their feet even as shouting boiled through the walls, a woman's high desperate wail shearing through the clamor.

"What's happening?" said Elspeth, serene as before, though her hand was already on the hilt of her blade.

Narset cocked her head, listening to the bells, their cadence. She knew their vocabulary, but she hadn't heard this message before: *this* was new, this was something the monastery hadn't experienced, a disaster they'd anticipated but only knew on paper. The bells rang out again.

"Dragon," said Narset, already running out of the study. "*There's a wild dragon inside the school!*"

There'd been attacks in the past, of course: the wild dragons, out of hunger or a playful malice, would occasionally test the Jeskai defenses, but those had been desultory, halfhearted efforts quickly deterred. The remnants of Ojutai's brood were more vicious, but even they were driven away. *Never* had a wild dragon even made it onto the deck of the ship. The skyriders and their mounts made sure of that.

But there was one here now.

And not only was it on the ship, it was inside the school. Fear shuddered through Narset. The fact it was night was her only consolation. The youngest pupils only had lessons during the day to allow them time with their family and their friends: scholarly pursuits were important, but it was equally

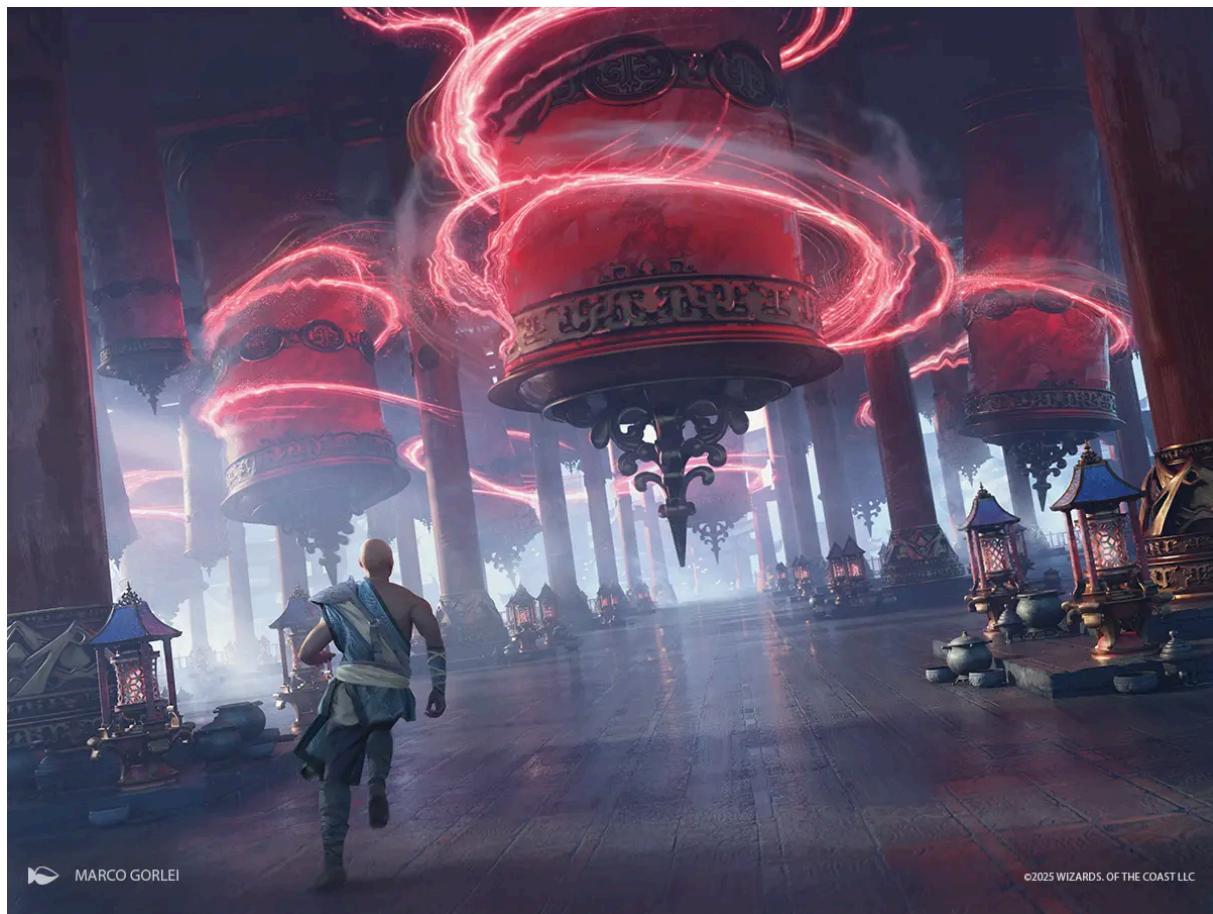
vital they grew as people, and that involved them building actual relationships with the world. It was the older children who would be in class then, the ones both driven enough and talented enough to volunteer for electives. Narset knew their curriculum well. They wouldn't immediately become fodder. Except "immediately" wasn't good enough. There was still a dragon inside with them.

One that had somehow bypassed every protective measure.

If it could do that, it—

Narset crushed the rest of the thought down. No point in speculation, no reason to do anything but get there and assess the damage. She needed to triage the situation, ascertain what they could do. Determine how many were already dead. The teachers all possessed an infallible courage; the dragon would have to go through them to get to the children, and, because of that, Narset knew there would be casualties. The only question was how many.

Behind her, Elspeth's light splashed the corridor in pale shadows, the angel keeping abreast as Narset ran. Around them, monks were either herding frightened children and civilians away from danger or charging down to the attacker themselves. Narset couldn't help the frisson of pride that ran through her. They were good people, humble in peace, exquisite in crisis; Narset had known many who were the reverse, who would brag unceasingly and then falter at the first sign of adversity. Not the monks of Storm Crane, though. They had proved their mettle before and were proving it again.



Art by: Marco Gorlei

Narset and Elspeth turned another corner. The school laid in the belly of the ship like a seed dreaming of a better future. There'd been months of heated argument preceding its construction: some had voted for it to be in the topmost levels of the towers where the students would have an unrestricted view

of the world around them, while others tartly insisted that was suicide, suggesting instead they best hide the school where there'd be layers of defenses and a hundred exit routes. Narset was eternally grateful the latter won, especially now as the ship bucked and heaved with the continued onslaught. More monks streamed past, the wounded cradled in their arms, debris slicking them with gray dust. Narset brushed her fingers along each of them, instilling them with a little more speed, a little more endurance: hardly the most impressive work of magic, but there was no time for anything else.

In the near distance, something broke under the repeated assault, and the ship seemed to bellow in agony. In the distance: screams.

Narset's heart lurched.

"Almost," she breathed, a prayer cradled in the word.

The two descended one last cascade of stairs. Suddenly, she and Elspeth were face to face with the ship's attacker. Narset realized immediately how the dragon had evaded their defenses and the fatal mistake in their planning. The floor beneath the creature gaped into the open sky; it had gored its way up through the ship's hull, chewed its way through wood and metal. The hallway was almost too small for the interloper, a leviathan like a chunk of ice carved from a glacier, all teeth and vicious, sinuous motion. It was so big, only its head, throat, and a single paw were fully inside the ship. There was something almost comical about the sight, but Narset didn't feel like laughing, not with the dragon's gore-scummed mouth, the lifeless arm jutting between its teeth, limp palm held out like its owner could still be saved.

Beside her, Elspeth drew her sword with a silken whisper of iron.

The dragon took no notice of the sound or the monks bracketing its enormous form, its attention solely on a chamber recently collapsed, the door stoved in like ribs. Through the wreckage, Narset could just about see five youths holding one another and the determined face of a sixth standing at the ruins of the entrance, her hands held out. The faintest silvering of the air told Narset the girl had thrown up a barrier between her and the encroaching behemoth.

"That won't hold for long," Elspeth: terse, inhumanly calm.

"No," said Narset. "No, it won't."

The dragon's hide was stippled with wounds and filmed with a fine sheet of blood; Narset's monks had done what they could. However, it was too well-armored, and their weapons only had so much reach. The dragon drew a gulping breath and then another, throat working furiously, as though it was trying to dislodge a bone. The temperature plummeted. When Narset next spoke, her breath was white in the air.

"Do you trust me?"

Elspeth did not reply, only unfurled her wings, rising into the air: she was brighter than any star, beautiful as legend, and Narset understood then why the faithful of those other planes would follow their angels into the mouth of hell. She lifted her radiant sword, looking for all the world like a weapon herself.

"On my mark, I need you to dive for its throat and *cut deep*."

Narset had no idea how well an angel could survive a dragon's digestive tract or a point-blank blast of ice. But of all of them, Elspeth stood the best chance of doing what must be done. The dragon's mouth was still red gum and slick flesh, its throat still meat. The angel glanced at Narset, expression

unchanged and briefly, the Jeskai woman regretted never knowing Elspeth in her first life: the incorruptible figure whom the heavens clawed out of the grave to be its champion.

“Just say when.”

The dragon inhaled. Inside the well of its throat, Narset saw billowing steam as the cold turned the air heavy. She gestured for the arrayed monks to fall back, stared unblinkingly at the radiance until her eyes watered: they’d only have one chance. Too soon, and they risked truly testing the constitution of an angelic being. Too late, and, well, Narset wouldn’t think about that yet either.

Time slowed to honey.

“Now.”

Elspeth dove headfirst into the open maw, sword held out like a beacon. Narset saw it cut, and she saw it cut deep, piercing the roof of the dragon’s mouth—

She gestured at the monks with a hand: now.

Gore erupted in a soupy curtain, drenching the angel, splattering the bright silver of her armor a violent red—

Narset rushed forward with five of the monks, prying the rubble apart, another three raising shields as they worked.

The dragon reared back, head whipping to the right, bringing a wall crashing—

Narset felt the air reverberate with the impact, but the shields held.

It tried to bring its teeth down on Elspeth, but that only drove her sword deeper into its skull. The creature’s roar became a shriek as the angel pushed her blade up, up, high as it could go, until it was hilt-deep in mucus-sheened tissue—

The children were passed between monks and sent hurrying down a corridor. Two, three, four. Narset counted under her breath as each child vanished from sight.

Six.

The angel and her adversary were at an impasse, neither able to escape the threat of the other. But with their wards safely evacuated, the monks of Storm Crane Monastery no longer had to be cautious. In unison, they took arms again, those without weapons lifting hands now ablaze with light. Elspeth had given them an opening. Foam bubbled through the dragon’s maw. The dragon took another breath and gagged as Elspeth torqued her powerful frame in a half-circle, slicing a flap of muscle from its mouth. The monks struck as the dragon screamed, steel and fists pulverizing soft tissue, shattering teeth, turning the insides of its jaws into a slaughterhouse.

That was enough for the creature. It began to writhe back, struggling to escape its attackers, every hungry thought replaced by a need to flee. Mouth lolling wide enough for Elspeth to step back out, it fixed Narset with a baleful stare before slithering down and by the sound of it, up.

“It’s returning to the deck,” said Elspeth.

Narset could still feel her pulse hammering in her throat as she stared at the archangel. Elspeth was a red effigy, her hair matted with blood. Even the glow of her wings was transformed, no longer that brilliant gold but a ruddy light. What could be seen of her expression remained eerily tranquil.



Art by: David Astruga

“Then let us pursue,” said Narset, and they returned to the stairs. With her adrenaline starting to run low, she felt each pump of her legs and was both grateful and envious that Elspeth simply glided ahead of her. They emerged into the whipping winds of the Tarkir sky; a shrill roar to Narset’s left told her the skyriders had engaged the attacker. Narset spun a coil of magic between her hands, ready to strike out at the dragon if it should try the deck, but the beast didn’t seem eager to face its opponents from the hallway again. It roared once, close enough that Narset felt its fetid breath as a cold wind, then swerved off the side of the ship, firing occasional blasts of white, icy air from its maw. Narset felt her muscles relax. The skyriders could handle things from here.

Elspeth settled next to her. It seemed the archangel had come to the same conclusion. “I will respect whatever decision you make. If you tell me that the Jeskai cannot assist the Multiverse, I will leave and seek aid elsewhere,” said the angel. “But the dragons will devour the other planes if something is not done. We could use your knowledge.”

Narset looked over the mutilated ship, her monks staring at her with expectant faces.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll give you my decision in the morning.”

It took several hours to inventory the damage. To Narset’s relief, there were precious few casualties. Injuries were numerous, but the Storm Crane Monastery was famous for its healers, and there was no shortage of monks attending the wounded. The ship suffered the worst in the attack. A chunk of the hull was gone, complicating any ability to perform repairs: the builders would either have to work

painstakingly from dragonback or devise some way to land without the ship sinking immediately into the water.

Those, however, were tomorrow's problems.

Elspeth trailed after Narset in meditative silence as the latter spoke to each of the affected families. She was then taken to the baths while Narset consulted with her council on plans for the next week: which village might be affected by the situation, which of their sibling monasteries needed contacting to ensure the populace remained sufficiently attended. It was scant hours before dawn when Narset finally concluded her duties as waymaster, slinking to retrieve Elspeth.

"These are your quarters," said Narset after leading the angel to the sleeping deck. She opened a nondescript door at the end of a corridor and gestured at the interior of the room. An oil lamp cast a soothing bronze warmth over the space inside, lengthening the shadows of Elspeth's wings so it seemed like she filled it entirely.

As far as rooms went in the monastery, this was one of the more sumptuous ones: it held an indulgent amount of soft bedding, even a reading nook with cushioned chairs. Whenever a delegate from the other clans came to visit, they were housed here. The Jeskai woman watched with increasing apprehension as Elspeth walked a slow exploratory circuit around the room, her impassive face sheened with what was beginning to look worryingly like embarrassment.

"Are you certain? I feel like someone else might have more need for this space."

"No, no, no," said Narset. "It is yours for the night. Make yourself comfortable."

Alarm flickered across Elspeth's expression like the shadow of passing wings.

"Thank you," she said with excessive care, leaving Narset to feel like she might have made a terrible faux pas. Elspeth saved her from any further analysis by folding her into a stiff-armed embrace. "Ajani said very kind things about you. I'm glad to see they're all true. We'll speak in the morning."

The angel stepped back. Narset was struck by the golden heat radiating from the angel, like she held the sun instead of a heart inside her chest. The Jeskai woman gave a curt nod, and the two, now exhausted of small talk and easy courtesies, gazed at one another for a few more excruciating seconds before Narset said, "I suppose I shall let you sleep now. We will speak tomorrow."

As the waymaster of the Jeskai closed the door behind her, Elspeth still standing with the kind of crisp posture usually reserved for military parades, it occurred to Narset that she had no idea if angels even slept.

"Taigam?"

Narset rubbed sleep from her eyes as the older monk let himself into her study. The recent years hadn't been terribly kind to him. Though he was as muscular as he was in his youth, lines had begun to gather like carrion birds around his eyes and mouth. His cheeks were thinner, the bones of his skull far more prominent than Narset remembered.

"Waymaster, I apologize for intruding at this hour," said Taigam, offering a perfunctory half-bow. "But the matter is pressing."

"Is this about the reconstruction effort? I'm aware that the hull features a rather large hole right now, but we have guards stationed there to ensure that nothing takes advantage of it. Tomorrow, the builders will begin work. I just thought—"

Taigam's mouth thinned with impatience. "It's not that."

"What is it then?"

They'd been peers once. Under different circumstances, Narset might have wanted him as a friend. But Taigam had resented how quickly she'd advanced through the ranks of the Dragon's Eye Sanctuary and how much Ojutai favored her. She couldn't blame him. Unlike her, he'd stayed loyal to their dragon. If not for the fact he was forced to choose between exile or his old allegiances, Taigam wouldn't have renounced Ojutai. Certainly, he would not have led a coup against him. Nonetheless, the familiarity of a shared history meant they shared a type of misshapen kinship. For that, Narset allowed him his liberties. That and the fact he missed Ojutai, too.

"It's about your guest." Taigam stood at the threshold, arms folded.

"Elspeth? She was of great help today."

"She is only an omen of things to come."

The words surprised a laugh from Narset. "Taigam, I never took you for a superstitious—"

"Forgive me for my attempt at delicacy, Waymaster. Because you asked, I will phrase it in plainer terms: the wild dragons had never been tempted to such violence before."

Narset was silent.

"It may simply be coincidence, but we cannot deny the possibility that this attack was a consequence of her arrival," Taigam's voice softened. "And we cannot risk it happening again. Already, we are impaired. What will happen if we're assaulted again?"

"We have no proof that Elspeth's presence was responsible for this."

"We have no proof it wasn't," came the suffocatingly gentle rejoinder. There was no venom in his words, no need for such. "We gave up everything we held sacred for the sake of our people, didn't we? Razed our past and burned our future in hopes it'd buy the Jeskai freedom. What is the point of that freedom if we must die for someone else again? If we're meant to perish for another, it should have been Ojutai."

Someone else might have called those words treason. Narset found that she could not.

"Send her away, Narset. As far away from the Jeskai as it is possible," urged Taigam again. "You are waymaster now. Your highest responsibility is to your people. Do not forget that."

And Narset said nothing to that either.

The day had only just begun to bleed through the tarry, starless black of night when Elspeth heard a polite knock at the door. She opened it to find Narset standing there, expression apologetic.

"I'm afraid the Jeskai cannot help you."

Elspeth nodded. She had not come to Tarkir with any specific expectations, only a desire to provide warning, to find answers. It would have been preferable if she'd been able to solicit some help, but this was not Tarkir's responsibility. The archangel—

Narset adjusted the strap of a rucksack slung over her shoulder, her face filling with a ferocious light.

"But I can."