Homecoming

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From set *Dominaria United*

Every plane was different, and everyone who walked between them knew; it was impossible *not* to know. The air on Innistrad was not the air on Zendikar was not the air on Kaldheim. The flowers weren't the same, and so neither was the pollen; the songs of the small birds in the trees never quite aligned. Liliana knew no two planes were identical, had known since the moment her spark awakened and carried her involuntarily to Innistrad, land of deep, slow shadows and rich Gavony honey.

She had never found anything sweeter anywhere else in the Multiverse, and her morning tea always suffered from its absence.

So yes, every plane was different, and Liliana had known that long before she came to Arcavios and the hallowed halls of Strixhaven, but as she had never tried to make one of those unfamiliar planes her home, she had never considered how, as the days stretched out in classes and controlled chaos, in hours without end, the nights might start to wear on her. The night sounds were different here than they were on Dominaria. The frogs sang a different song.

She hadn't expected it to grow so hard to carry.

She was happy enough during the days. She was helping to shape young minds, molding them with her words. Given time, she could guide them away from the countless mistakes she'd both seen and made during her own youth, when power had seemed limitless and consequences, while unavoidable, had always been something she could put off for another day.

There were other Planeswalkers on campus, which was something she hadn't been anticipating when she'd come to hide herself away in academia, but the Kenriths were young enough to be unaware of the details of her past, and when she'd been a Witherbloom student, she hadn't been in the habit of bringing up her professors in casual conversation. Unless their travels through the Blind Eternities brought them into contact with one of the people who blamed her for everything she'd ever been adjacent to, they were unlikely to ever hear her name in conjunction with her past, or to mention her to others. Liliana Vess, Mistress of Death Itself, could fade away, and Professor Vess could teach forever.

If only she could learn how to sleep through the Arcavios nights.

She stood at the window of her personal rooms, looking out over the necroluminescent glory of Sedgemoor as it glowed faintly in the darkness. It hadn't changed since her own school days, not really, save in the sense that Sedgemoor was constantly changing, a landscape in eternal blossoming, decaying flux. The first time she'd seen it, she'd thought it was the most beautiful thing in all the planes. She still thought so.

But oh, she remembered it being so much easier to *sleep* in those days, before the War, before the Chain Veil, before the Gatewatch and Nicol Bolas and Gideon

His name was a broken bell hanging where her heart should have been, and every time she rang it, she remembered she deserved the sleepless nights. She deserved so much worse than this, than her comfortable rooms and the view of her beloved Sedgemoor, she deserved the dissolution that had fallen to her comrade—

"There you are, Lili," purred a voice, familiar and cold and enticing all at the same time. "I was wondering if I'd lost you forever."

Her hands tightened on the teacup she was holding, practically a spasm, but she didn't turn.

"Come now, my dear, you can't have believed that I'd abandon you so easily as all that. I know it's been a while, but in my defense, you were rather wallowing in the loss of all that power, and it seemed unlikely that my presence would speed the matter along in any measurable way."

Liliana, greatest necromancer in the Multiverse, leader of armies and conqueror of death itself, took a deep breath, set her teacup down on the windowsill, and turned.

Behind her was a man, apparently human, save for his eyes, which were a beaten gold brighter than they had any right to be. His hair and beard were white, impeccably trimmed and shaped, and his clothing, although old-fashioned, was clearly tailored to his measurements. He looked like nobility. He looked like power.

He looked like he hadn't aged a day since the first time he'd appeared to her, sweet lies in his mouth and false consideration in his words.

Art by: Chris Rahn

"I thought you had finally tired of me," she said. "I thought we were done with this foolish game of is it cat and mouse when the mouse pursues the cat? I don't need you. Leave me."

"To what? A joyless life of grades and badly written essays? Of pests and pointlessness?" He laughed, and it was a bitter sound. "You know this won't hold your attention long. You need novelty. You need *power* . Come home to me, and all you desire can be yours at last."

She choked her own laughter down. "I doubt that. I sincerely, sincerely doubt it."

"You know what I can offer you. You know what we can be together."

"I know there are deaths I can't undo," she snapped. "I know that sometimes, gone is gone, and sometimes, all I can do is honor the fallen."

"By counting yourself among them?" He looked at her sadly. "Come *home* , my Lili. Come back to where you grew as a fresh spring flower, where first I plucked you for my own. Come home to me."

Then he was gone, becoming a whirling storm of ravens, all of them flying at her, and past her, out the open window, knocking her teacup to the floor.

The sound of shattering porcelain penetrated her nightmare, and Liliana sat up with a gasp, clutching the thin blanket she'd been curled beneath to her chest. She looked frantically around the room. No man; no birds. No footprints or fallen feathers. She was alone.

Alone with the frantic hammering of her heart, and the metallic taste of fear in her mouth. She pushed her covers aside, sliding her feet to the floor and into her slippers, and rose, starting toward the fire. A cup of tea would take the taste away. It was hard enough to fall asleep on these hot Arcavios nights; the proper blend of herbs and florals could only ease the way

Something crunched under her foot. She stopped, looking down at the remains of her favorite teacup, then bent, touching her fingertips to the liquid splashed all around them.

It was still warm.

As she looked up toward the open window, she almost thought she could hear him laughing.

The next day's lessons dragged by in a haze of students, awkward silences, and near-botched lessons. After the third anxious Witherbloom second-year exploded a pest in an impressive but useless spray of magic, Liliana dismissed her principles of necromancy class, telling them to go work on their essays before they disappointed another teacher as badly as they had disappointed her.

Closing her classroom, she turned toward the Biblioplex. Hallucination, spirit, or uncontrolled manifestation of her own power, it didn't matter; this had to stop. It would have been bad enough if this had been the first time he'd appeared to her on Arcavios, but he'd been showing up for months, his visits accelerating in frequency, until it was a rare night when she could sleep all the way through to morning. The fatigue was setting in. If this went on much longer, she would have to involve someone else, and that meant putting them at risk. No. She didn't do that anymore. Whatever this was, she needed to end it on her own terms, and she needed to end it alone.

If he was real—and she increasingly believed he might be, after everything he'd shown her, everything he'd told her, everything he'd *done* —the Biblioplex would tell her what she needed to know. It might not contain all the knowledge in the Multiverse, but it came close enough for any reasonable being's purposes.

The sight of the imposing Professor Vess striding across the school in the middle of the day was unusual, but not enough to draw too much attention. She made her way swiftly to the great library, requisitioning one of the small poleboats necessary to cross to the section on ancient Dominarian history that she had located some months before, and began her search.

She had been flipping through ancient tomes and consulting dusty scrolls for the better part of an hour when he spoke, once again from behind her, as he so often seemed to be. The shadow at her heels, the predator on her trail.

"You aren't going far enough back," he said. "If you're looking to bring me home, my Lili, you'll need to look much deeper than you have been."

She snapped the book she was holding shut. "So you're telling me you're real, then."

"I'm telling you I was real, once, and might well be again, if that's how the stars align. I'm telling you to come home to me. If this is the armor you feel you need to wear for our reunion, knowledge and ancient names, then I'll help you find them, as I can."

Liliana whirled around, glaring at him. He looked impassively back.

"I told you to leave me alone," she hissed. "I told you I was done with you. I will not be used. I will not be a weapon in another monster's hands."

"But will you be a monster on your own?" He spread his own empty hands. "You're so close, Lili. You almost have everything you need. Come home, and I can give you what you're missing."

"Get. Out."

"As you like. But you'll come to me. You always come to me."

Then the man was gone and the ravens filled the space where he had been, spiraling into the air on charcoal wings, feathers knocking dust from the spines of ancient tomes, talons pulling one such volume from the shelf and sending it crashing to the floor. Liliana lunged, almost catching it, and when the birds were gone, picked it up and looked at the cover.

A History of Terisiare said the title. No author was listed. Liliana frowned, carrying the book with her to the nearest table, and as she sat, she began to read.

When she rose, some hours later, she did so with a new, if terrible, understanding, and with a name, one that she dared not think too hard, lest it give him power he didn't currently possess. But he had a name, and that meant he existed outside her mind. He wasn't her creation, even if she was in some ways his.

The monster that haunted her dreams, that had taken a frightened, powerful young girl and shaped her into a terrifying, borderline villainous woman he was real. He could be stopped. He could be destroyed.

She could cleanse this tiny bit of evil from the Multiverse, for Gideon's sake.

Holding that thought firmly in mind, she left the Biblioplex for the administrative offices to request a leave of absence. The process was easier than she feared it might be, made easier by her distracted state over the past few weeks. Students had been unhappy, and their complaints had begun to spread; while her position was still more than safe, a little time away seemed advisable. For everyone's sake, really. It was less than a day later when she stepped up to the edge of the Sedgemoor, looking out over its strange, beloved landscape, and closed her eyes.

"All right, you bastard," she said. "I'm coming home."

The blackness rose around her as her spark flared to life, coalescing into a cloud of impenetrable dark. When it cleared, some seconds later, Liliana Vess was gone.

He had bid her to come home to where he first met her, where he first convinced her to listen to his truths that would have been kinder as lies; that meant Dominaria, and more, it meant the Vess family estate. Appearing in a swirl of black on the small rise behind the house, Liliana looked out upon the ruins of what had once been her entire world.

The ground was a swampy mess, soil eroded and corrupted. Odd, that she should love a marsh so deeply when a marsh had destroyed her home. Vess Manor was a ruin, more decrepit than could be explained by time alone, and the stronghold that should have held it in protective shadow loomed like a rotten limb jammed into the ground, tilted and unsteady. Liliana took a deep breath and started

walking toward the house, not allowing her magic to shield her from the mud squelching underfoot or the water seeping into her shoes.

"Come home," whispered the voice out of her past, echoing between her ears, implacable and ancient. *"Come home to me."*

She walked on, toward the ruins of her family home, memories of better times trying to flood her mind. Long days of training with Lady Ana and the Forward Order, of running through the sunlit fields with her brother, of tumbling in the hay with the village boys attracted by her budding charms. Liliana pushed those fragments of idyllic light aside. That girl had been a healer and a general's daughter, destined to decorate a court and hang from a noble's arm, a bauble at best, not a diamond in her own right. Everything she had suffered, everything she had lost, it had all served to make her more than that girl ever could have been.

She had no regrets. Nor would she allow them to seep into her mind as the corruption still seeped through the soil, a reminder of Belzenlok which Dominaria might never expel.

The house was unstable, she could see that clearly, and so she veered around it, moving toward the graveyard where generations of supplicants and Vess ancestors were buried.

Art by: Martina Fačková

The soil there was firmer, less yielding, as if even Belzenlok and Josu had been able to overcome the weight of so many of the dead. She walked until she reached the great Dominarian oak at the graveyard's center, then sat, her back to the trunk, and closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, the house was as it had been in her youth, the light golden and innocent in its brightness, and everything had the faint gleam around the edges that told her she was dreaming. If that weren't enough, the Raven Man stood before her, the only thing in the recreation of Vess Manor whose outline didn't shine but seemed instead to swallow the light.

"So I'm here, and I'm asleep, which I know you like, since I'm less likely to stab you when I'm unconscious," she said. "What do you want from me?"

"I wanted you to find me, and it seems you have. You've grown into what I knew you could become. You're almost ready for me."

"Ready for what, *Lim-Dûl* ?" She stressed his name as hard as she could, watching for his reaction.

To her disappointment, he simply laughed. "It's been some time since I've heard that name spoken, in or out of dreams."

"If it pleases you, I won't do it again. If it harms you, I'll never stop."

He laughed again, and this time, it was the cry of a raven, primal and hungry. "Oh, Lili, you wonder why I've always wanted you so? Why you were the prize I chose to cultivate? We could work miracles together. We could—"

Liliana glared at him. "Tell me why you wanted me to come here."

He paused. "Is it not enough that I wanted to be reunited with my dearest Liliana?"

"No."

"You know my name. What did it tell you of my history?"

"Great necromancer. Tyrant. Defeated and disgraced, bound into a magical object that was then lost."

"Then you know I do not rest, nor ever shall. Even you, Lili, couldn't lay me down if you tried. The chain of which I am a single link is too long and too powerful." He sighed. "We thought to add you."

"You mean you thought to have me for your own," she snapped. "You were molding me into your perfect vessel. Did you ever ask if the Liliana Vess you were crafting was the one I desired to be?"

"Does any parent ask?" He shook his head. "You would have been my masterpiece, but your own choices have ruined you."

She stood, stepping away from the tree. "Then why did you call me here?"

"Because I'm not the only one here." He looked at her, golden eyes solemn as the grave. "They will destroy everything if allowed. I once dabbled with them, you know, but they were always more trouble than they were worth, it cost me *two* lives. They'll destroy me if they can, and they'll destroy you as well. They'll destroy everything."

"So you called me to be your *weapon* ?"

"Yes, and for once, no. I called you to be Dominaria's weapon. Fight for the plane that birthed you. Save me, save them save yourself." Lim-Dûl started to say something more, then stopped, eyes widening in what looked very much like fear. "Save yourself," he repeated, and snapped his fingers, bursting into a cloud of black-winged birds. They flew in all directions, cawing loudly, and when the last of them was gone, the landscape was as it had been when she arrived. The hazy edges of the dream had dissipated; she was awake, and—if he spoke truly this time—she was in danger.

Liliana stood, looking around the desolate landscape, trying to find anything that had changed since her last visit. The marshy ground was never the same from moment to moment, but that was to be expected; the walls of the house creaked and teetered, but decay was natural, even when brought about by unnatural means. She was seeking something more. Something deeper, something darker, something *wrong* .

She reached out with a thread of magic. She—and by extension, it—had been born here, and even in its current corrupted state, the land knew her. It surged to answer her presence like a starving dog answering its master's call. She stroked it gently as she continued to reach out, enjoying the moment of connection, of familiarity, of—

Her magical thread hit a pocket of something so alien and other that it repulsed her, turning her power back on itself and pushing it away. It wasn't corruption. Liliana knew corruption. She knew what it

meant when a land turned foul. It wasn't rot or decay, but it was a taint, all the same, new and horrific and ancient all at once. She pulled her power back to home and looked in the direction she had been reaching, trying to understand what it was she'd brushed against. She didn't move. For the moment, it felt as if the only safe ground she had was the ground that belonged to her family's dead.

But since when had she sought safety? Liliana took a breath, dropped her chin toward her chest, and marched into the mire, heading for the trace of *wrongness* . If it were as alive and terrible as it felt, it had to know she was there. Better to face it head-on than to hide from it like the child she would never be again.

Alone, Liliana Vess walked into the dark as a solitary raven feather sank into the muck behind her.

The forest around the estate had been consumed by the swamp, but many trees remained, jutting rebelliously upward even as their roots rotted and their leaves dropped away. One day they would topple, and the transformation of this land would be complete. Liliana kept walking, not quite willing to extend another thread of magic outward to verify that the wrongness remained. What she'd touched did not give the impression of being something that would so easily let go.

Her awareness of the land continued trembling at the edge of her mind, the estate grateful for her return in a way that it would never have been when it was true forest, green and growing lush, dedicated to life. That had been another Liliana's land. This land, though this land belonged to her, all the way down to its bones, and it was terribly happy to have her back. She walked on, confident in her connection to the ground beneath her feet, and in her ability to remove the thing that shouldn't be here.

A new smell appeared in the air, metallic but not metal at the same time, neither blood nor rust, but sharp on the back of the tongue as either of those things might be. It smelled *wrong* . She stopped walking. If she was close enough to smell whatever was happening here, she was close enough.

Black smoke gathered around her hands as she focused on the place where she'd felt the change to her ancestral home, swirling and twisting with the force of her command. Liliana narrowed her eyes. To have been called here was bad enough; to have been called here to face some unseen danger, with no more than a few grudgingly given words of warning, was an offense.

She was still pulling the magic to her when a figure stepped out of the trees. Her skin was the chalky white most common among the kor, and she had no hair, neither atop her head nor around her eyes, which wept constant streams of viscous black liquid. More of the liquid dripped from her left hand, seemingly seeping from her skin, and things that looked like tubes extended from her back, vanishing under her clothes.

Art by: G-host Lee

“Stay where you are,” she said, and her voice belonged to a construct, not a living thing, filled with echoes and horrible harmonics. “You have entered our gathering grounds, and you are thus forfeit.”

“I’ve entered my own family lands, and nothing about me is or has ever been forfeit,” Liliana replied. “I’ll stay. You’ll go.”

“No,” said the figure, and smiled the horrible smile of someone who had forgotten how such expressions were meant to be shaped, how they should be worn. “We own this place. It is too late for you. You should never have come here.”

The faintest of splashes from behind her caused Liliana to look around, confident in what she’d find there. Instead of the ordinary ambush she anticipated, she faced a horror.

Death held no mysteries nor frights for Liliana: she had seen it in all its forms, from the peaceful to the profane. Decay was natural. Reanimation was natural as well, in its own way, and nothing to shy from. But these creatures

The figures arrayed behind her had been somehow twisted out of true with their own natures, patched together from dead and living flesh at the same time, and the dead flesh did not kill the living, and the living flesh did not resurrect the dead. Connections of artificial tissue and that dripping, impossible oil held them together, silver sutures and gleaming wires, and the sight of them was repulsive and entrancing at the same time. They seemed to have been created from disparate sources, human and elf and kor and merfolk and others, dismantled and reassembled into something more efficient than the sum of its parts. All of them had claws, or fangs, or scythe-like blades where their forearms should have been. Some had extra limbs, or mandibles, and they were watching her with dispassionate eyes. Her life or death didn’t matter to them. They would kill her without consideration, or regret.

Art by: Brock Grossman

She glanced back to the kor woman who'd appeared first. She was watching her still. She hadn't moved.

"You can be of use, yet," she said. "The remnants of the spirit cleave to you. It called you here. We would have it."

"The Raven Man?" she asked. If this strange figure didn't have his name, she wasn't going to provide it. "What business can you have with him?"

"That business is our own," she replied. "What business do you have?"

"He's haunted me since I was a young woman, and I would be free of him."

"Then give him to us, and we will free you." The kor woman smiled again. "Phyrexia is the greatest of freedoms."

"I think I would prefer to pursue freedom on my own," said Liliana. How was it she had never faced Phyrexia before? She knew the stories, of course—she was a daughter of Dominaria, and none who walked the Blind Eternities did so without knowing of Yawgmoth's great betrayal. But she had thought the contamination contained on what had been Mirrodin, and the fact that she had missed that battle made her no less aware of the danger she was suddenly in.

She released the power she'd been collecting, reaching instead for the strength of her spark, the connection that would let her flee this place for something more hospitable. It leaped to her call, and for a moment, the temptation to simply planeswalk away and leave this problem for someone else was strong. She looked at the kor woman, who looked back, not seeming to realize what she was doing, not seeming to see her as any sort of threat.

Well. She would teach him the error of that way of thinking soon enough.

"Why here?" she asked. "Why my family's lands?"

"The spirit we pursue is anchored to an object somewhere in this place," she said. "It has been sunk deep into the ground, sleeping and forgotten. Our excavations will bring it to light."

If she left, they would dig up the relic that anchored the Raven Man, and they would take him away. She would never be haunted again. Lim-Dûl would finally be forgotten, and no one else would be tangled in his incomprehensible machinations.

That, more than anything, decided what she did next. She released the slow draw of power from her spark and looked at the kor woman. "What is your name?"

"I have the honor to be called Elas il-Kor," she said. "I am One, but I am also distinct, for the sake of what must be done. Why do you ask me?"

"So I know what to put on your headstone," said Liliana blithely. She reached again for the magic sleeping in the swamp, and this time she grabbed it and yanked it tight as a vibrating wire, the air around her growing thick as ectoplasm and cold as the grave. The flesh-and-steel horrors that had surrounded her froze for a moment, too surprised by this transition to react.

Liliana turned and ran.

The art of Witherbloom was in growth and decay. The magic of life had never answered easily to her, but the magic of death did, and the swamp was a sepulcher in its own right, filled with the bones and bodies of a thousand smaller creatures. Elas il-Kor had eight terrors of Phyrexia's own design. Liliana had the dead of an entire biome. As she fled and the Phyrexians gave chase, they found themselves assaulted on all sides by snakes, rodents, deer, even a large dead dog long since rotted down to bone and scraps of tendon.

Liliana's creatures weren't true zombies: once Liliana's attention was elsewhere, they'd go back to their graves. They rose only to obey her command to slaughter and would fall again as soon as they were done.

Elas il-Kor watched, seeming almost amused by the overwhelming flood of undead beasts. They were individually no match for the Phyrexians, who sliced and struck and ripped them into pieces. Still, their very numbers told her everything she needed to know about the strength of this necromancer. She was an unexpected bonus of this long and irritating assignment. They were warriors, not archaeologists!

But what Sheoldred commanded, she would have, and Elas il-Kor was honored to serve in any way at all. If it now seemed that service might yield an unexpected bonus to strengthen the Phyrexian position on Dominaria, all the better.

"I want her alive," she said, perfectly calm, as her team finished slashing Liliana's assault force out of the air and started after her. She followed behind at a more sedate pace, unhurried. Phyrexia didn't need to hurry.

Phyrexia always won, in the end.

It was almost insulting, thought Liliana, running for the graveyard where more powerful bones awaited her call; they weren't chasing her. They were *following* , which was something altogether different. If not for the fact that she was outnumbered, she would have stopped, turned, and shown them precisely why they owed her a proper pursuit. But she hadn't lived as long as she had by being foolish, and so she ran, feeling her connection to the earth beneath her strengthen with every step, until she was standing above her ancestors. Then she stopped, and turned, and faced the forces of Phyrexia.

Six of them remained, Elas il-Kor and the five soldiers who answered to her command. All were artificial to some degree or other, transformed as the swamp had been, pulled away from their true natures. Well, she wasn't the one to purify them. That had never been her role in the Multiverse. She raised her hands, grasping the power of a dozen generations of the dead, drawing on what they could have been

and never were, and lashed out at the closing Phyrexians in a terrible blast of rotting light. They were artificial, yes, but they were also natural, and the parts of them that were flesh knew how to rot.

However, thanks to the unnatural taint running in their veins, it seemed they no longer knew how to die. They shrieked as their bodies bristled with gangrene and withered from necrotizing corruption, but they kept racing toward her, more visibly artificial now than they had been only a moment before. Their flesh dripped away as they advanced, unmade by the ravages of swift decay.

Elas il-Kor drew a javelin from her back, the wickedly barbed tip dripping with some foul, viscous substance. Liliana couldn't move without releasing the hold her magic had wrapped around the Phyrexians, and so she glared at her, holding her place, holding her ground as she drew back and prepared her throw.

Elas was a master marksman. She didn't aim so much as simply positioned herself and trusted her arm to find its target. The spear was a combination of the same metal that gleamed from the bodies of her soldiers and fire-hardened wood that any kor warrior would have been proud to carry. Liliana hoped the wood on the spear was more dominant than it seemed. The metal on the bodies of the others was still clean and untarnished, not rusting or rotting as their bodies were.

The workings of death could look very much like the passage of time, when focused correctly. Elas il-Kor threw. The javelin flew. Liliana pulled harder at the death-soaked, corrupted ground, yanking demonic taint and natural death into herself as fast as she ever had, and doing it with nothing but herself to depend on. No Chain Veil, no demonic contract. Just Liliana, the bones of her own dead, and the land.

And deep below the rest, the vessel that had contained a necromancer who would fell an empire, who had been possessed by one greater than himself, who had been grooming her to become his tool: a simple ring. Her questing magic, seeking further reservoirs of power, grabbed hold of it, pulling as much strength from its reservoir as could be managed on instinct alone, without true and focused intent.

Overhead, a raven cried, and for a moment, Liliana *saw* .

Saw the first Dominarian mage to tap into the power of death itself, the first man to hold the strength of the grave in his hands and make it dance to his whims. Saw his spirit, his power, pass down into his own student, possessing her, and then a new vessel not long after, over and over again, all the way to Lim-Dûl. Saw his ring change hands until it fell into those of her ancestor, who buried it here to hide it from those who would abuse it—but that wasn't the end. She saw the Raven Man, a piece of the ancient necromancer's fractured soul, stirring in a vessel she knew all too well, called to him from across the planes by a young woman's necromantic dabbling. She saw the same woman finally sever the link when she freed herself from the Veil, the chain stopped cold by an absence of hands to hold it, and saw what had been meant for her.

She had been intended as one more link in a line stretching back to that first, now-nameless mage, her will subsumed to the remnants of his, her soul remade in the image of those who had come before her. The ring whispered to her of power without limit if she would just give in, just become the vessel Lim-Dûl crafted her to be. Just *become* Lim-Dûl, in a way; she would still be Liliana Vess, but the part of her that loved her students, loved Sedgemoor, grieved for Gideon and for her brother that part would fade mercifully away.

I yield to no one , she thought, shoving the artifact's promise aside, and grabbed only for the power that surrounded it, the power that could be hers without accepting the burden of Lim-Dûl's mantle.

Liliana unleashed a roiling wave of black fog to sweep over the decaying Phyrexians, catching the javelin in mid-flight. The wood rotted instantly away, leaving gleaming metal behind. Elas il-Kor's throw had been true, but the sudden loss of the wood skewed the javelin's trajectory, and it struck Liliana in the shoulder. She screamed.

She was a powerful mage, yes, and a warrior in her own right, but silence in the face of pain had never been a Dominarian virtue, and the javelin's point burned like ice and acid. Reaching up, she yanked the javelin free. Her tattoos gleamed gold. If the wave of roiling darkness had seemed absolute before, the next pulse flowing outward from her body made it seem like the first had been nothing but a light fog. *This* was true blackness: *this* was death given leave to run through the world of the living without fetters.

The Phyrexians caught in the initial wave staggered and dropped to their multijointed knees, exposed metal finally succumbing to tarnish as it decayed. Elas il-Kor was too far back for the cloud to reach. She watched, a small frown the only sign of her disapproval, as her troops went down and moved no more.

Then they began to stir again, rising jerkily from the ground and turning to look back at her with eyes that were nothing more than pits of gleaming blackness. They advanced toward Elas as the cloud cleared, revealing Liliana with hands raised and tattoos shining, directing her new force toward their former leader.

Elas il-Kor took a step backward. "This is a perversion!" she shouted. "Once you belong to Phyrexia, you remain within Phyrexia!"

Liliana gritted her teeth, struggling to hold her reanimated minions. She wasn't wrong. She could feel the taint that lingered in their bones struggling to reassert itself; when she let them go, they would rise again, returned to their horrific family. But for now, this was Vess ground, and she was rooted to the dead beneath her, and they were hers before anything else.

Elas il-Kor took another step back. Then, choosing survival over her soldiers' fate, she fled.

Liliana sagged where she stood but held tight to the Phyrexians. As soon as she loosened her grip, she knew she would lose them. The ring she'd sensed below her, the overflowing well of necromantic power, was deep enough that she lacked the strength to bring it to the surface while holding her new thralls. Without lithomancy, she would have to move it through the hands of the dead, one passing upward to the next, and that could take days. But she couldn't leave it where it was, either. What little she knew of Phyrexia, from the stories and the histories, told her that if they wanted something, it was better to deny them. Pulling the remaining strength from the bones beneath her, she pushed the artifact downward, commanding the ancient dead to hide the object away, as far beneath Dominarian soil as possible.

Finally, she released the Phyrexians to fall and twitch, then gathered what magic yet slept within her and stepped into the Blind Eternities, vanishing in a swirl of blackness. She would return here soon enough, to cleanse her land and protect what she had buried here. She only hoped it wouldn't be to find the dead had turned against her. But for now, Arcavios and Sedgemoor waited to clean her wounds and replenish her reserves.

From the shadows, a golden-eyed man watched her go, content that he had pulled her strings one more time. She was still his creature, even after everything. She had protected him, in the end.

And one day, she would come home.