
Episode 2: Lessons

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Tavver didn't know how long he had waited in that cramped tunnel beneath the Biblioplex—hours, certainly, though it felt like far longer. He didn't feel safe moving during the day; eventually, he'd have to emerge from the underground passage and cross the ravine separating the school from the surrounding woodlands. After that, he'd be in tree-cover, mostly, but even that was no protection against being seen. This was a school full of *mates*—damn it all! The best mates in all of Arcavios, no matter what the other Oriq said about all the undeserving brats. And what if one of the Founders happened to fly overhead? He had no interest in being incinerated by dragonflame. No, Tavver always thought himself a pragmatist. So, very pragmatically, he waited until nightfall.

He wasn't excited about facing Extus again—not after failing his mission. But he would worry about that when he got out alive. Tavver had seen true darkness in that professor's violet eyes. She'd meant to kill him—and for what? So that Extus could have some dusty old book he remembered from however many years ago?

Finally, with night fallen, he could start the hard trek home through the forest and over the rocky bluffs. It would be a long night.

Three weeks earlier, before Lukka met the Oriq mates—before they'd kidnapped him, in fact—he squinted against the light, his stomach still churning from planeswalking. Never a pleasant sensation. Across the grassy field ahead of him was a small village. He could see a few people milling about; one woman was waving her hands over a row of tilled earth, muttering a growth spell, while another ordered what looked like a mud construct to drag a plow through the field.

He wandered through unpaved streets until the smell of food drew him into an inn. Ignoring the stares and whispers of the people seated at the squat wooden tables, Lukka sat down at the wooden bar.

“Looking for something, stranger?” said the innkeeper, a round man with a head of robust curls.

“A hot meal,” said Lukka. The innkeeper hesitated as though about to say something, then nodded and moved toward the kitchen.

“Haven't seen clothes like that before,” came a voice behind Lukka. “You're not from around here, I imagine.”

He turned. A tall man in the same rough clothing as the rest of the townsfolk had stood up from his table and was walking over.

“No,” said Lukka, turning away. “Guess I'm not.”

“You know who they say dress strange and act stranger? Coming through little towns like ours to recruit? The Oriq,” said the man behind him. His tone was far from friendly.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Where are you from, then?"

Lukka kept his eyes straight ahead, not bothering to even look at the loudmouthed man. "You wouldn't know it."

He heard the man suck his teeth. The innkeeper still hadn't returned from the kitchen. Lukka was starting to doubt he ever would.

"Okay, Oriq, I think I've heard enough. We don't take kindly to meddlers in this town, or those who seek to disturb the peace. If we were a proper city, we'd get the closest, least busy Dragonsguard to sort you out. But we're just a small farming village—so we've learned to deal with strangers ourselves."

Lukka felt, rather than saw, the rush of magic as the man began a spell. *Is everyone a damn mage on this plane?* He turned and, in one fluid motion, smashed his fist into the man's jaw. The man dropped limply, the wispy energy curled around one hand dissipating. Lukka had an instant to breathe before another man crashed through the door of the inn, a ball of flame hovering above one outstretched hand. Lukka got a few steps away before the firebolt splashed against the back of his coat, knocking him through the glass of a nearby window and into the street.

The stink of charred leather filled his nose, mingling with the searing pain across his shoulders. Lukka snarled and cast his senses out over the village, finding every vulnerable mind he could. He called to them, stumbling back to his feet.

The fireball-throwing man had left the inn and was joined outside by two other burly-looking townsfolk. "Where are your friends? We know you Oriq scum like to travel in packs."

"Oh, they'll be coming along any minute now," said Lukka.

The man lifted his hand and began to fill it once again with fire. Before he could finish, a dog leapt through the air, its sharp teeth flashing as they sank into his arm. The man screamed, the flames sputtering out as he fought to free himself. He managed to tear his arm free just as a horse charged at him. He and his companion dove out of the way, but the horse followed them, spurred by Lukka's rage. It reared back, then brought its hooves down hard.

Lukka's smirk faded as hunger shot through his stomach. He staggered down the road, his mind absently following the fight through the beasts, until the noise faded behind him.

Usually, reflected Liliana, one did not willingly walk into a dragon's lair—or if one did, they did so with a death wish and some very keen blades. She had neither as she approached the tangled grove where Beledros Witherbloom made her home. All she brought with her were questions that needed answering.

She pushed aside a low-hanging bough, trying to make as much noise as possible. Sneaking up on a dragon was an even worse idea than visiting one. But the nest was empty, just a broad patch of foliage pressed flat into the earth, and Liliana felt relieved in spite of herself. *Nicol Bolas is gone. What am I really shrinking from?*

The lair was surrounded by dark-leaved trees leaning over the divot in the earth like jurors. The scent of decay mingled with fresh earth, but Liliana knew that Beledros had a formidable collection of arcane writings tucked away. Glowing spheres of various sizes lay tucked into massive root structures, protecting their contents from the humid air. Maybe there was something in the books and scrolls that

could help her bring Gideon back. Liliana peered into one of the globes, careful not to get stuck in the thick mud underfoot.

She was looking through her fifth sphere when the sound of wings brought her attention to the sky. Liliana took a deep breath and remembered to adjust her professor's uniform as the shadow of Beledros Witherbloom passed over her.



Art by: Raymond Swanland

Beledros circled the spot twice before landing with an earth-shaking tremor. She folded back her black feathered wings as she studied Liliana with those eerie, bright eyes. “Taiva may be harsh at times, but surely dealing with him is not as troublesome as trekking all the way out here, Professor.”

“What I need isn’t something the director can help me with.”

Beledros gave what Liliana thought was a curious look.

“I found some of your work on aetheric reincorporation.” Liliana pulled a pointed piece of metal from her pocket. It was the only piece of Gideon she had, a tip from one of the blades of his sural. “What would it take for such methods to work on humans?”

Beledros made a rumbling noise, the sound vibrating the ground beneath her. “This smells of a dangerous sort of meddling to me. Some questions are better left unanswered.”

“I didn’t come here for a lecture. I just want a simple answer.”

“When it comes to aether, there are no simple answers.” Beledros walked past Liliana, making her way into a deeper recess in the side of the crater. She turned and laid down, wrapping her tail around her massive form. “You speak of the very essence of life. It cannot be ordered about like a pet. Resurrection—apart from baser necromancy, you understand—is fiendishly difficult, even for myself.”

Liliana set her jaw. “And what about the child of Professor Gladefell?”

The dragon went still, each huge black eye a bottomless pit. “No. That was something I will not see repeated. For all our sakes.”

“I am not some wayward student, Beledros.” Liliana stepped toward the dragon, Gideon’s blade cold in her hand. “I do not need your coddling, and I do not need your protection.”

“Perhaps not,” Beledros said. “But it is not you I would be protecting.”

“What do you care about humans, anyway? I imagine we seem little more than insects to you. None of the Founders have even been to the university in years.”

The dragon turned her head and closed her huge, heavy-lidded eyes. “The deans are more than capable of keeping order and peace. As are the Dragonsguards and the Oracle.” She let out a little chuckle, stirring the layer of decaying leaves and mulch underneath them. “Even the Archaics do their part.”

Liliana’s nails dug into her palm. The dragon had to know more than she was letting on. And this was her last hope. Gideon’s last hope. “Please. He took my death. Help me give him back his life.”

Beledros cracked an eye open and looked at her for a moment. The wind blew over the top of the crater walls, stirring the dark trees surrounding the lair. Finally, she closed her eye again. “I cannot.”

A jolt of pain in Liliana’s hand told her she had gripped the piece of the sural a little too tightly. She stared down at her bleeding palm, trying to calm the storm of her emotions. This wasn’t a fight she could win with force or sheer will. Liliana tucked the blade piece back into her pocket and turned to leave. She was halfway up the crater when Beledros spoke.

“The pain can be unbearable at times. But in the end, how we honor the dead is reflected in how we treat the living.”

Liliana looked back, but the dragon was still curled up in the side of the crater, slowly drifting toward sleep.

Lukka stumbled as he moved across a stony ledge, minding his step along the edge of a sheer cliff. Far below, short grass and scrawny trees held on bitterly to life. His hunger had only gotten worse, tightening his stomach more and more with each shaky step. What little food he’d managed to hunt down was long gone, and he’d run out of water hours ago.



Art by: Kieran Yanner

The ledge suddenly gave way beneath him, crumbling into loose stone. Lukka cried out as his ankle twisted. He threw out his hands, reaching for anything to save him from the long fall, and his fingers caught on the edge of a sharp, flat stone. Gritting his teeth, he pulled himself up the side of the cliff, legs scrambling for purchase, and finally threw himself back onto the stone shelf. He laid there for what felt like an eternity, his lungs burning as he sucked in gulps of air.

Thoughts of his near demise faded as his gaze caught on the rock that had saved him. It floated in the air, the end facing him smooth and curved. Lukka stood up, finding more of the odd rocks hovering around the side of the cliff. Together, they formed a half-circle, as if the rest of them were lost within the cliff itself.

A small noise grabbed his attention. Lukka tensed, ready for trouble—but, as it came again, it seemed a pitiful sound, soft and weak.

Lukka followed it until he found a pile of stones. He dropped to his knees, pushing one of the stones away. A pair of golden eyes looked back out at him. The creature gave a miserable yelp, blinking against the light. As Lukka shoved the rest of the stones aside, he saw that her gray fur was dirty, covering the spots that ran in a camouflage pattern along her back. A long gash ran across the creature's snout, and something had taken a chunk out of one of her pointed, black-tipped ears.

Free now, the foxlike creature limped past the stones Lukka had moved, putting more space between them. He sat down hard, the strength in his legs finally giving out. He felt faint. "Go on, then. Get."

The fox turned and darted around the curve of the cliff just as consciousness slipped away.

When he woke, the first thing he registered was her presence. He kept still, slowly opening one eye. She sat on her haunches a few paces away, staring at him. Then her eyes flicked to the ground beside him.

Lukka followed her gaze. A pile of berries and nuts lay beside his leg. "Thank you."

The fox tensed, rising to her feet.

Lukka started to raise a hand but stopped himself. He stared at her, the silence stretching as the first sun began to rise in the distance. Finally, Lukka took a deep breath and cast out his bond's senses.

The warm brush of fur caressed his mind as the link between them settled. It had been a while since he used this gentler magic—not for a servant, but a partner. He hadn't even realized how much he'd missed it.



Art by: Kieran Yanner

Liliana pushed off the side of the towering metal torch and continued her trek back to Strixhaven empty-handed. She'd been gone for days by this point—days of classes that had gone untaught, meetings that had gone unattended, professorial duties that had gone undone. After Beledros's refusal to help her, she'd followed rumors of an Archaic to the ruins of Caerdoon. But she'd found no massive, mystical giant packed full of arcane secrets. In fact, she hadn't found much of anything. It had been for nothing—and now she would be questioned by the other professors. Or worse, by Deans Valentin and Lisette.

An animal screech sounded in the distance. The strangled cry came from somewhere up ahead, off the path, though Liliana couldn't see past the thick canopy of trees. She stepped into the undergrowth, keeping low.

In a clearing not far off the path, seven people stood in a circle. Purple magic flared around their outstretched hands, the same color as the light that wound in smoky trails around their masks. Liliana pressed against the gnarled trunk of an old tree and watched as the band of Oriq agents surrounded a large white stag.

The beast bleated and reared back, swiping at one of the agents with its hooves. One figure fell back, but the others pushed forward, forcing it toward the metal crate that lay open behind it. Inch by inch,

the stag backed into the crate, its cries splitting the air—then sharply cut off as the door of the metal box slammed shut.

Liliana watched, silent and still, as they loaded the captured stag onto a wagon waiting nearby. Eventually, the creak of the wagon wheels faded into the distance.

In the distance, Lukka could make out the curling tail of smoke from a chimney somewhere beyond the woodland. In another world, another plane, he would have felt relief. Finally, somewhere soft to rest his head. Somewhere to get a decent meal where he wouldn't have to mind-control rabbits into letting him break their necks. But here, in Arcavios, he knew he'd just get treated with the same suspicion as he had been everywhere else. The people of this plane hated everything new, everything they didn't understand. Like those Oriq, the masked mages who used magic "forbidden by the colleges of Strixhaven," whatever that meant. Every villager seemed to think there was an Oriq agent hiding under their bed. In some ways, it reminded him of home, of the way General Kudro had looked at him when Lukka had first shown his bonder magic. This was a place ruled by fear.

The sound of raised voices pulled Lukka from his thoughts. He followed them to the other side of a ridge. Down below, he could see a woman wearing immaculate robes facing a group of masked individuals. Purple, wispy smoke curled and danced across their covered features; all wore hoods, turning their silhouette alien and inhuman.

The woman didn't appear concerned to be outnumbered four to one. Stitched onto her robes, Lukka could make out the stylized form of a dragon. *Ah, the Dragonsguard I've heard so much about.* Elite mages that had studied at the beck and claw of those scaly old reptiles.

"This is your last chance," the woman was saying. "Turn yourself in and—"

The masked figures didn't wait for her to finish. One shot out a hand, a coil of dripping purple energy snapping out toward her. The Dragonsguard flicked her wrist effortlessly; there was a bright flash, and suddenly the coil of dark magic was flying—

Right for Lukka.

He ducked just in time, the spell hissing horribly as it flew overhead and hit a tree to his right. At once, the trunk began to blacken as rot spread out from the point of impact. Bits of dead leaves rained down on the clearing, and the sound of cracking wood signaled imminent collapse. Lukka leapt out of the way just as the top of the tree split off and landed where he'd been standing.

That could have killed me. He couldn't decide who to be mad at—the one who'd cast the spell in the first place or the one who'd redirected it toward him. He settled on both.

Lukka cast his senses out into the forest, snagging on a bear claws-deep in a berry bush. Further: his senses grabbed the wolves dozing as they waited for nightfall, and he jerked them to wakefulness. Further still, he felt the strange fervor of a creature that had already been creeping toward the clearing, drawn by the lure of magic? Lukka frowned but kept his focus. Connecting with the nearby beasts, he summoned each and every one to the clearing.

The Oriq agents, meanwhile, spread out to surround the Dragonsguard. One of them threw a ball of crackling black flame toward her; with a gesture, she turned it to stone, and it dropped out of the air harmlessly. Another conjured what looked like a snake made of glittering, silvery liquid; with a spoken word, the Dragonsguard caused a massive clod of dirt and grass—shaped surprisingly like a mongoose—to rip its way free of the ground before pouncing on the arcane serpent. Even Lukka found himself impressed by how effortlessly she seemed to answer whatever spells they could throw at her.

Behind her, a wolf pounced from the treeline, teeth bared savagely. This one almost seemed to catch the woman by surprise—but before it could reach her throat, she sealed the beast in a greenish bubble. It floated off into the air, raging helplessly against its containment.

“So it’s true,” said the Dragonsguard, turning to look at him up on the ridge. “We had heard of an Oriq with your abilities.”

“For the last time, I’m not a damn Oriq!” growled Lukka.

As if to drive home his point, the bear burst forth from the trees by the line of masked figures, sending them scrambling as it swiped wildly with those huge killing claws. One of them threw a hex over his shoulder as he fled, withering the animal’s arm and causing it to roar in pain.

The sound was joined by a far less familiar sound. Lukka looked over to see the strange creature with whom he had connected burst forth from the treeline. It skittered across the clearing on six legs, disturbingly quick. Glowing tendrils waved from its head as if underwater. With single-minded focus, it made straight for the Dragonsguard.

This was a foe she seemed to take seriously. Lukka watched her set her feet and contort her hands in an arcane position. She spoke a word, and roots as thick as his arm burst forth from the ground, wrapping around the chitinous legs of the creature. He heard the snapping of limbs as it was dragged down into the earth, screeching all the while, until the soil covered the insectile thing with an awful finality.

Lukka was so drawn in by the spectacle, he didn’t notice the root creeping around his own ankle until it yanked him into the soil down to his waist. He pressed on either side of himself, trying to lift himself free, but to no effect. The Dragonsguard sauntered over to him, clearly in no rush.

“Neat trick. But, at the end of the day, you’re nothing but an untrained hedge-mage, like any other Oriq.” She extended an open palm toward him.

Something blurred at the edge of Lukka’s vision. A second later, the Dragonsguard screamed. There was a blooming of heat and a bright wash of flame, and he turned away, shielding his face with one hand. When he looked back, a familiar shape stood over the Dragonsguard’s still body, her fiery tail twitching as she sniffed at her fallen opponent. When she was satisfied, the foxlike creature turned and looked at Lukka, her big eyes oddly knowing.

Lukka held the beast’s gaze for a moment before looking around the clearing. The Oriq agents were gone. If he hadn’t been there, they wouldn’t have lasted more than a minute. No discipline, no strategy. Just a bunch of scary costumes.

Lukka dragged himself to his feet and scanned the ground nearby. Obviously, the Oriq agents had left a trail in their haste to get away; he easily spotted the signs the masked mages had left in their wake. *If everyone who doesn’t play by the rules here is an Oriq, maybe I’m one of them after all.*

He was about to start following the trail when a soft yelp made him pause. Lukka turned to find the foxlike creature sitting in the clearing. She blinked and cocked her head to one side.

Lukka turned and shook his head, resigned. “Fine.”

He closed his eyes and reached out with his mind. The fox’s own mind seemed to leap to meet his, and the bond softly slipped back into place. Lukka let himself relive the sense of relief and gratitude he’d felt when he’d seen her fly at the guard.

He opened his eyes to find the creature watching him, her tongue hanging over the side of her blood-stained maw. She trotted over to the Oriq’s trail and sniffed at one of the tracks.

“Well. If you’re going to stick around, then I’ll need to call you something. How about Mila?” He felt the pleasant ring of recognition in her mind and nodded. “Alright, then. Mila it is.”

Extus held his breath as he poured the shimmering red liquid into the shallow bowl. It swirled into the glowing potion, arcane light welling up in strange bubbles and casting strange shadows across the walls of the cave. The red lightened until it was nearly white—then violet shot through the mixture and the potion dimmed until it was nothing more than inert dark sludge. He smacked the bowl across the room, and it shattered against the wall, leaving the failed potion smeared across the stone. *That was the fourth failure.*

Movement caught his eye, and Extus looked toward the entrance to the cave. One of his Oriq agents stood there, the dark magic flaring around their mask an unpleasant reminder.

“Why are you just standing there? Bring me more cervidar essence!”

The agent jumped as if physically struck and backed away from the cave, disappearing into the tunnel that led to the main cavern.

Alone, Extus slumped over his worktable. He looked over the books spread open before him. None of them had been any use. None of them showed him how to attain the power he needed. His gaze wandered over the side of the table to the floor, where the other ritual components lay still. The mage hunter’s legs were still pinned down, held in the grip of the Oriq agents who now lay dead around it. All valuable tools, sacrificed for nothing—every last bit of life drained from their bodies, and it wasn’t enough.

Someone entered the chamber behind him, and Extus straightened. “Are the rest of my supplies here?”

“There has been a delay. They ran into a Dragonsguard,” said the agent.

Behind his mask, Extus gritted his teeth together. He reserved a special hatred for the Dragonsguard. Of all the meddlers who stood in his way, they were by far the worst. So arrogant, so self-assured. He was eager to show them just how misplaced all that confidence was—the Dragonsguard, and all the rest of Strixhaven’s elite with them.

Not a day went by where he didn’t think about that place. He could still remember walking through the Hall of Oracles. He could still see the space where his statue should have been. Just to the left of The Snarl.

Extus looked at the sludge, now dried on the wall. If more power was what he needed, that overlapping tangle of power hidden away below the school would offer more than enough, though reaching it would be no easy feat. That nexus of ancient energies wasn’t some dusty book sitting on a shelf in the Biblioplex; it would be guarded by the most formidable forces Strixhaven could muster. Constructs, elementals, professors—Dragonsguard.

“There was someone else there,” said the agent, drawing Extus from his thoughts. “Someone interfering.”

She told him about the man who seemed able to call beasts of the forest to do his bidding. By the time she finished, Extus was more than intrigued.

“They say that he’s following them now,” the agent said. “Should I tell them to get rid of him?”

“No.” Extus cleared his throat. He glanced at the bodies next to his table, then lifted his gaze toward the shadows overhead. The torchlight shone on the hard exoskeletons of the dormant mage hunters as they hung from the rocky ceiling. “Let him come.”

Behind his mask, Extus smiled.

Liliana set down the tome she had been studying and rubbed her eyes. Another day of fruitless research. She had done all that she could think of, and none of it would work. There wasn’t a book or scroll or spell in Strixhaven that could bring Gideon back. Besides, with the Oriq on the move, there were more pressing matters at hand. Nobody else seemed to be taking them seriously.



Confront the Past | Art by: Kieran Yanner

She glanced out the window behind her desk. In the distance, the suns had begun their slow descent toward the horizon. Light glinted off the floating stones of the Dawnbow. Liliana stared at the star arch, her gaze tracing its curve down toward the buildings of the main campus.

She’d come here to find a way to bring Gideon back. Nothing more and nothing less. But if she hadn’t been here, she wouldn’t have seen that Oriq agent in the Biblioplex. Liliana hated the idea of destiny. She’d always thought of it as someone else telling her what to do; just another heartless master. Gideon, however, had been a great believer in being in the right place at the right time. Maybe it was time she learned a lesson from him. *Not too late, I hope.*

There was only so much she could do alone, though. Even if the mage students spent their free time blasting each other across the campus, they weren’t prepared for what was coming. She needed help. She needed power.

A flash of gold outside her window caught her eye. Liliana leaned forward.

A group of young students ambled past her office. One of them stood out, her blond hair shining in the dim light as it fell over the shoulders of her Prismari uniform. Rowan Kenrith held her Witherbloom

friends' attention as she gestured wildly, her sword bouncing against her leg as she led the group further down the walkway and out of sight.

Liliana sat back in her seat. *Maybe it's time to take my role as a Professor a little more seriously.*