

Clans & Legions

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“Salutations and congratulations, Wojek Weslyn,” my boss says to me, positively burning with pride. I’ve served under Sergeant Skormak, the associate director of war development, for the past thirteen years I’ve worked at Sunhome Annex Four, but we’ve hardly ever spoken face to face. He extends his hand, and I fight the urge to flee. They say there are two types of people within Boros Legion: those who flock to flame-kin, and those who run from them. I definitely fall into that latter category, but I shake my boss’s hand anyway. Even through the protection of his enchanted gloves, I can feel the fire burning beneath.

“Your adulations are noted,” I say. “There is no doubt your glowing recommendation was a big factor in my promotion.”

Sergeant Skormak smiles and shakes his head, red-golden flames rising off his scalp. “My words were nothing but the truth. You did the work. You passed the tests. It is you who have earned this honor.”

He places a small box and an envelope on my desk. “I will miss your efficiencies when you move to the Wojek Annex,” he says to me. His breathless voice wavers in and out like a flickering flame. “But I know you will make us all proud.”

And now it’s me who’s burning up, figuratively, at least. I’m the first of my coworkers to be promoted to Wojek in eight years. Sure, we all pretend everything is fair and equitable, and that if you work with integrity and decency you will eventually gain recognition, but in reality, Annex Four is where Boros Legion sends its chaff—swiftblades who’d bombed the wrong encampments, skyknights who’d developed a fear of heights, flame-kin who’d been too hot-headed to dissipate upon battle’s completion, and minotaurs like me, who’d simply had the misfortune of being born into the wrong family line. It’s kind of fitting that this building used to be a warehouse. It’s a great place to store all the people the Legion would rather forget about.

My fingers tremble as I open the box. I can hardly bear to look at what I think, I *hope*, lies inside. As the lid loosens, I make out a hint of red. My heart seizes up, and all the fur on my hide stands on end, and suddenly I’m just staring at it, biting my lip so I don’t start bawling over Sergeant Skormak with big, fat tears that extinguish his flames. I rein in my emotions, puff my chest with pride, then take the red cord out of the box and drape it around my neck and under one arm. My first accolade. A copper token dangles from it with “Boros Wojek” printed around the rim. They’ve entrusted me to keep the peace in our lands, to combat injustice, and to seek out what is honorable and righteous.



Boros Locket | Art by: Aaron Miller

“It suits you,” Sergeant Skormak says. “Perhaps the sun does indeed shine upon your line.”

“Perhaps,” I say, going to open the letter next.

Sergeant Skormak clears his throat. “It’s to be read in private. Good luck to you, Wojek Weslyn.”

The title gives me chills. Or perhaps it’s the sudden dip in temperature now that my boss has walked away. I look closely at the letter. My name is printed across the envelope in gold foil. I slip a fingernail under the lip and carefully open it. There’s a card inside—an invitation.

This note is to inform you that your presence is requested this evening at dusk at the Sunhome Solarium for a reception held in honor of the new Wojek inductees. Light refreshments will be served. Dress attire to consist of formal robes and belts. “A war fought with an unjust mind dies in the trenches. A war fought with a valiant heart lives forever in the rubble of your enemies’ bones.” —Klattice, Boros legionnaire

I look at it. I mean *really* look at it. The first thing to strike me is the Boros Legion symbol imprinted into the paper a fist silhouetted by a sunburst, but something’s off. Then I realize it’s a right-handed fist, not a left-handed one like it should be. And the sunburst has ten rays instead of nine. My mind snaps to the counterintelligence exam I’d taken a couple months back. There’d been a task like this one, finding concealed messages among the mundane. We’d gone out searching for hidden Dimir codes—a pattern of drawn shades in an apartment tower’s windows, sewer grates twisted to indicate a series of directions, that sort of thing. I’d detected eight of them, more than anyone else in the cohort. And from now on, I would always need to remain on high alert, searching for signs and signals, like the one I’m holding in my hands.

This isn’t an invitation. It’s the briefing for my first assignment as a Wojek counterintelligence agent. Now, I must decode it.

I scrutinize every word, every letter. I turn the paper sideways, squint my eyes and assess the blank space between words. The story starts to take shape—a meeting point with an informant. It's like a game. I play with the words: Light refreshments will be served. Food. Soldiers call food gruel. Gruul. And if that's a real Klattic quote, I've never heard it. Trenches. Rubble. The location has to be a bunker near the Gruul Rubblebelt.

It's all starting to click into—

“Ooh, party at the Solarium. Can I be your plus-one?” Aresaan says, looking over my shoulder. I crumple up the invitation, hide it in my fist, and then right before I turn around to face my workplace nemesis, I empty my lungs. I don't care how many times you've seen a Razia copy, they always take your breath away when you look at them. I won't give her that satisfaction.

“I'm not sure what you're talking about,” I say, fumbling over my words, pretending that her radiant red hair isn't dazzling the hell out of me. That message was meant for my eyes only. First day as Wojek counterintelligence, and I've already jeopardized an assignment. “There's no party.”

She raises a brow. “Sure, Ossett. Anyway, just wanted to congratulate you on your promotion. It's a fine accomplishment for someone with such weak convictions.”

My nostrils flare. She's the worst of the washouts, a former Warleader whose bad decision on the battlefield had led to fifteen thousand dead Boros soldiers some thirty years ago. As penance, she'd had her wings bound and was stripped of nearly all her magic, except a few rallying spells to help with recruitment efforts. Even after decades in exile, she still flaunts the unapologetic arrogance and intrusiveness typical of angels, but she's no better than the rest of us misfits.

“My convictions are just fine,” I say, head tilted forward, my horns aimed right at her. “I've earned this. If you've got issues about my promotion, you'd better make peace with them.”

I never knew peace growing up. My father had been in and out of battle, and our family spent its time worrying over his safety out there on the front line, and then worrying over our own safety when he'd return. He'd watched as his Ordrun counterparts got promoted past him, year after year. Maybe those minotaurs deserved it more than him, I don't know. What I do remember is that his temper had gotten shorter and shorter each time he returned, and I can't even count the number of times he and my mother had butted heads, horns scraping, angry hooves putting gashes in the wooden floors, sometimes the walls. As soon as they started yelling, I'd hole up in my room, my sister's red hair ribbons slung across my chest, and pretend I was a Wojek officer, charged with keeping the peace. Wojek counterintelligence needed to be alert and astute. I'd concentrate on finding hidden messages in the water stains on the ceiling, in the patterns of dust gathered on the floorboards, in the silent moments when my parents finally stopped arguing. I became good at noticing things that didn't want to be noticed.

And now, here I am on my first mission at the outskirts of Tenth District chasing down information that will help us keep the peace. A Gruul encampment has steadily encroached into this quaint neighborhood and tensions are high. I've heard rumors that this area was the site of a dragon extermination ten or so millennia ago and that the dust here is largely comprised of disintegrated dragon bone. They also say the bone is not totally, completely one hundred percent dead.

Working in a place like this, my Boros armor is a must for protection, but stealth is important as well. I've got a red-gray cloak draped over me, the color of the dirt here. Dragon bone or not, it gets into everything, making me feel gritty all over, but the dirt isn't the only thing that makes me uncomfort-

able. It's impossible not to notice the Gruul presence, eager to tear down everything we've worked so hard to build. The children are feral, bone and leather strung together in a loose attempt at clothing. A drunken ogre stumbles past, then falls, his momentum obliterating an incense cart. I try to find some redeeming qualities among them but fall short. My hand keeps itching to give out violation notices, but I maintain focus on finding my informant.

In the market, I witness a Gruul child steal a melon from a cart. The merchant yells out, a brittle old Viashino who couldn't give chase if he'd wanted to. The child runs right in front of me, and it's all I can do to grab her arm. I clench it tight, and she looks up at me with the eyes of a trapped boar.

"You shouldn't steal," I scold her. "You dishonor your city. Your family. Yourself." I try to be mad at her, but her arm, it's so thin I feel like it's going to snap in my grip. I loosen up some. She grunts at me, teeth bared. And, whew, the smell coming off her. But something churns in my mind, and I can't bring myself to separate her from the fruit.

I sigh, then let the child go. She snorts at me, then runs off, her bounty clutched tight, eyes darting this way and that. I pull a couple zigs from my coin purse and pay the merchant.

He grins at me, and then flicks his tongue out to moisten an eyeball. "You know what they say," he croaks, "fight the Gruul, and you've got a problem for a day. Feed the Gruul, and you've got a problem for life."

I nod. Fortunately, I'm just in town for the evening, and she won't be my problem any longer than that. I press on. It doesn't take long to locate the bunker, hidden beneath overgrown weeds and wild cindervine enchantments slowly turning the facade to rubble. The place looks nearly forgotten, except for the infestation of baby hydras, each no bigger than the span of my hand. A few of the heads spit at me. I step out of the way, but some of the frothy saliva hits my boot. The acid isn't strong enough to eat through it, but light tan splotches develop on the dark brown leather. Protocol dictates that I report the hydras immediately, but they're not going anywhere, and my informant might.



Gruul Turf | Art by: John Avon

I enter the bunker. The heavy metal door screeches as it closes behind me, and I get my first breath of cold, stale air. It's dark in here, and it takes a long while for my eyes to adjust from the light outside. Finally, I see a set of stairs in front of me, and I cling to a loose railing as I make my way down. The stairwell opens up into a large room with a packed dirt floor. Several industrial tables and chairs sit about, cots are stacked high in the corners, and cabinets that must have once been well stocked sit open and empty.

A haggard man who looks worn beyond his years sits at one of the tables with a six-sided Clans & Legions playing board set up in front of him. My throat instantly clenches up. My father had taught me to play the first time he came back from battle. The fighting had hardened him, but he was still nurturing then. It was a good way for us to be together, to sit and be near without much talking.

"You've got information for me?" I say those words like I've practiced them my whole life. I can't believe this guy is sitting here. That means I'd decoded the hidden message and found him, and this wasn't some conspiracy I'd knitted together in my head.

"I do," he says, the weariness obvious in his raspy voice. "But first, let's play."

"I'm afraid I'm a bit rusty." I draw closer, keeping my calm. I can't afford to spook him now. I take a seat at the table across from him and read his face. It's dark down here, but I can make out the pattern of discoloration on his neck and up toward his temples, like faint scars. Interesting. Wojek apothecaries were known to make money on the side by removing tattoos from Gruul defectors, and the spells to disenchant the ink were harsher than the ones that put it there in the first place. Now I have a better idea of who I'm dealing with.

Black pieces sit before me, so I make the first move.

He twirls a finger, and one of his soldier pieces slides across the board. Is he a mage, then? Beyond the typical observations, you can also learn a lot about someone by watching how they play Clans & Legions. The first time I'd beaten my father—really beaten him, not just him throwing me a mercy win—he'd been so proud. Next time I'd beaten him, he flipped the board. My hand shakes as I pick up the cleric piece. A solid but predictable move.

"Do you have a name I can call you?" I ask.

"Brazier, if you must, Wojek Weslyn."

"You can call me Ossett." I narrow the distance between us to build up trust. I watch as he pushes his angel piece forth with the flick of a finger, leaving her completely exposed. Bait? I want so badly to inquire about the information, but it is too soon. I ignore the boldness of his move and counter with a skyknight. Completely bland, completely boring. "Do you play Clans & Legions often?" I ask instead. "I used to do league competitions when I was younger."

"We didn't have those where I grew up."

"Pity. All kids can benefit from the discipline learned from the game." I realize I've said the wrong thing as a snarl curls his top lip. I backpedal. "But you know, there's a bit of beauty in the chaos of it all, too. My father once told me that there are more combinations of forty-move games than there are hairs on every single living thing in Ravnica."

"Really?" Brazier says, eyebrow arched. "I never thought of it that way."

I move my angel out, a sacrifice. I could still play the game without her, but it would be only a matter of time before he nullified my whole army. Brazier knocks my angel over with one of his soldiers, but

he doesn't claim my piece for his boneyard. Instead, he looks up at me, the pain behind his weary eyes making me ache all over. He's ready to talk.

"What is it that you want to tell me, Brazer?" I ask. "I'm listening, and I will hold whatever you say in the strictest confidence."

"There's a spy in the Boros Legion."

"Okay. Can you tell me who?"

He nods. "But first I want a prisoner freed from Wargate. Release her, and I will have the information delivered to you in the market at sundown tomorrow." He passes me a note with a name on it. Baas Solvar. I've never heard of her, certainly not one of our renowned political prisoners.

"I want to help you, Brazer, but things like this take time. There's a formal process. Applications need to be submitted and reviewed."

"Do you know how many three-move games of Clans & Legions there are?" Brazer asks me.

I nod. Everyone knows it. "One. Razia's Folly. But your opponent has to practically be in collusion with you to pull it off."

"Mmmm-hmmm. Bribery. Extortion. Favors. You're the player, Ossett, but this definitely isn't a game."

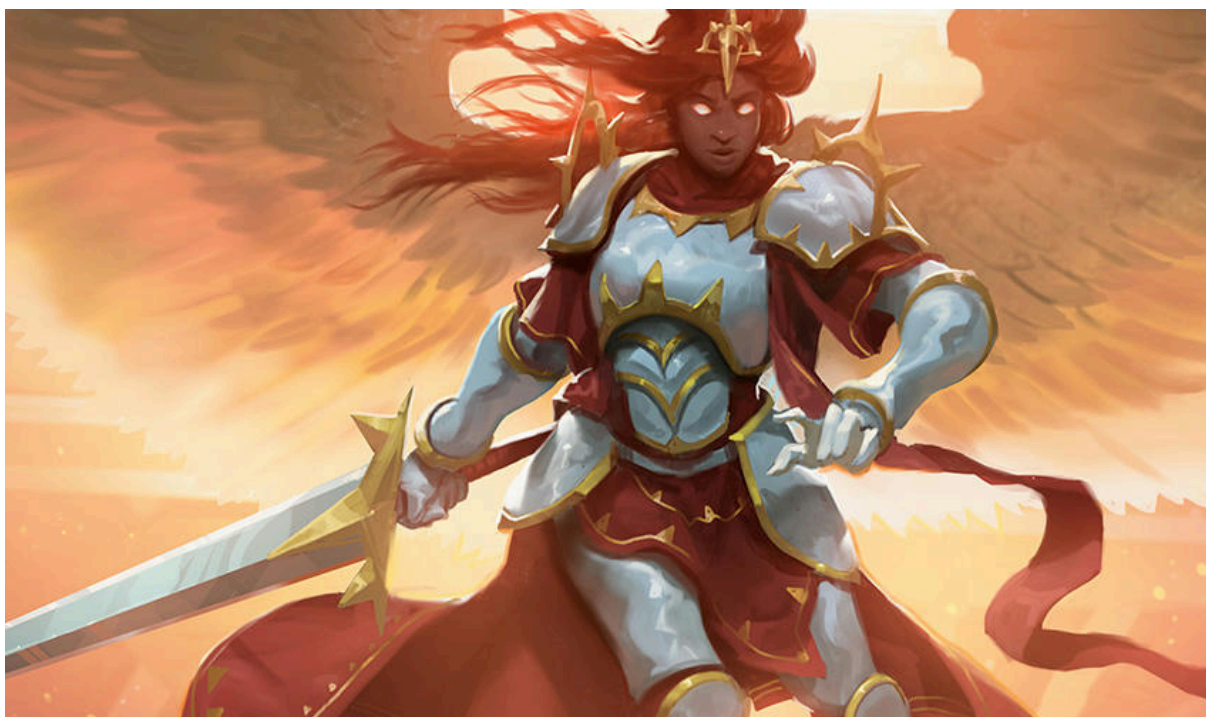
I hold my head perfectly still, because all I want to do is shake it right now. There's nothing honorable in corrupting justice. But a traitor among Boros Legion would be worse, especially now when tensions are brewing. In Boros Legion, we see things in black and white. There isn't the option for shades of gray: we'll take a person's freedom for crimes not yet committed, we'll forfeit a soldier's life to uphold the idea of peace throughout Ravnica, we'll punish a starving child for stealing food. It is our sworn strength, but it is also one of our biggest weaknesses.

"I will see what I can do."

I work late into the evening, preparing prisoner release forms. Baas Solvar, arrested in a Gruul riot. No other previous charges. Likely, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Simple case, really. All it took was a small bribe to Sergeant Skormak's assistant, and she'd snuck the prisoner release form into his signature pile. I'm sure my old boss won't mind. He'd said how much he wanted to see me succeed, for me to make him proud. He's been stuck at Annex Four for nearly as long as I have, and he knows how much of an accomplishment it is to make it out. First thing in the morning, I'll walk the case down to the Wargate Prison Camp myself, saving two more days of bureaucratic mishandlings, and by lunchtime tomorrow, Baas Solvar will be a free—

My eyes stick to the release form. Something jumps out at me, something bad. I try to ignore it. Try to miss it like whoever'd processed her intake had. But seems like those things I try not to notice scream to be noticed, too. Baas Solvar isn't her full name. Baas Solvar Radley. Most likely related to Govan Radley, the Rubblebelt raider who set off a mass chaos spell at Tin Street Market. Shoppers had been consumed with sudden rage and confusion, and they turned upon each other, food and wares becoming weapons. Twenty-four killed. A hundred seventy-six injured. I tuck the paper behind the others, but I can't unsee it. My heart pounds. Which is more of a threat to peace? Someone who we know is trying to attack us from out there in the streets, or some unknown who's here to dismantle us from the inside?

"Late night, Wojek?" Aresaan says, her hand on my shoulder. "You can always count on a minotaur to work twice as long and half as hard, am I right?"



Light of the Legion | Art by: Alex Konstad

“For Tajic’s sake,” I glower, shaking her off. “Don’t you have some potential recruits to foist your ‘powers’ on?” I clear my lungs again, nearly like instinct, now, then look at her. It’s like staring into the sun and not giving a care that your eyes are burning. Her stance is aggressive, arms crossed. Mouth pinched tight. Too bad it won’t stay that way.

“Just so you know, I signed up twenty-seven fools today, so eager to spread their blood across the battlefield.”

“Impressive. So when you’re out there recruiting, do you use some kind of script, or do you *wing* it?” I smirk as the arrogance drops off Aresaan’s face, and suddenly, she’s shifting her wings, bound up tight with razor wire. Couldn’t be comfortable. I sigh. She didn’t deserve that. Or, probably she did, but I should be the one taking the path of righteousness. “Please go away. I’m in the middle of something.”

“Something important?”

“Something that’s none of your business. I’m beginning to understand why they banished you from the Parhelion.”

“Woah, now,” she says, hands up. “Not banishment just a reassignment. And fifty years is a blink for angels. I’m just twiddling my thumbs, waiting for someone else to mess up worse than me, and that’s only a matter of time with the way Aurelia is running this place. You, you’ll piddle around with the Wojeks, trying to make a name for yourself, then eventually, everyone will see the imposter you are and start wondering why they promoted you in the first place. You’ll be right back here within five years, I guarantee it.”

“You don’t know crap about my capabilities.”

“Language, Wojek!” she scolds me, thin smile on her lips. “Where is the honor in a foul mouth?”

“Suck hoof, Aresaan.” I turn my attention away from her, and eventually, she gives up and goes away. I look at the case file. It feels so heavy now. What would it mean to my career if I can’t carry out my first mission? This isn’t hard. I don’t even have to lie. I just need to go on ignoring the truth.

Baas Solvar is free. I'd watched her walk out of the prison gates myself, a pit in my first stomach. Now I calmly wait at the market. The sun is still hours from setting, but I got here early, just in case. Brazer will show up. I can't let doubt into my heart. Not yet. Just like it takes the eyes a few minutes to adjust from stepping out of the sun and into the dark, it takes the mind time to adjust to seeing shades of gray.

I notice the child from yesterday, eyeing a loaf of bread sitting too close to the edge of a display table. I rush over before she makes the decision to steal, open my coin purse, and press five zigs into her palm. I get down onto her level. "This is no kind of life, you know that right? There are people out there who want to be proud of you. But you have to make the right decisions, even when it's hard, okay? Ask for help when you need to. There is so much good inside you."

The girl lights up and something sparks behind her eyes. "Kahti, good," she says, pressing her hand to her chest. Her voice is gravelly, almost a growl.

"Yes. Yes, you are. Kahti is good." She extends her arms, and I fall into her hug.

"Kahti good," she says into my ear. "So very good." She smiles again, then backs up and runs off.

I'm filled with a warm feeling, too. Then I notice my coin purse is gone.

Embarrassed and angry, I wait for my informant to show, and every moment my self-doubt grows. Had I let a violent raider go for nothing?

Two hours after the sun sets, I face reality. I head back to the bunker, half expecting not to find it, hoping that this had been some sort of weird dream, but no, it's there, hydras and all. My eyes adjust quicker this time, and I rush down the stairs, the concrete tacky underneath my feet, hoping to find a clue or hidden message.

Only what I find is Brazer's dead body, sitting where I'd left him, slit across his neck. The playing board is red and bloated from soaking in his blood. A set of red-black footprints leads back out of the bunker. The game pieces are exactly as they were, so he must have been killed right after I'd left. I look for more clues, but I'm shaking too hard to concentrate. I must report this to the Legion, I don't care what kind of trouble I'm in for.

I turn to leave, but wait

I turn back and examine the board closely. There's one piece missing. My angel. She should have been where I'd left her. I summon the courage to wedge up Brazer's slumped body. No piece hiding under him, none on the floor. I look everywhere. Whoever killed him had taken the piece with them.

I'm running back to Sunhome, fast as I can, but right before I make it to the gates, I'm intercepted.

"Woah, woah, woah, Wojek," Aresaan says like she's trying to bring a churlish mount to a halt. She grabs me by my shoulders, looks me up and down, sees the panicked state I'm in. "What happened to you?"

"I don't have time for your antics, Aresaan. There's been a murder."

"Seriously?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?" I hold up my hands, blood already matting my fur.

"Crap, Ossett. I didn't realize " she presses me forward toward the gates, and I nearly stumble over my own hooves. "You need to report this. I know we haven't been the most cordial of co-workers, but I'll come with you if you want "

I grumble. I don't want her with me, but I don't want to go in there alone either. "Fine," I say. "But don't be all " I gesture at the whole of her, " you."

I've always felt tiny standing before Sunhome, with its blocky stone towers like massive fists punching into the sky, but now I feel even smaller. Flames of justice burn high in their pyres, shedding light upon deceit and threats to order and unity. They may brighten the streets, but no way they're strong enough to reach through the shadows dwelling in my heart. We're greeted by the Sunhome Guard, a battalion of them standing in front of the silver-rimmed gates. Many of the guards are giants—brawny and bare-chested, save for a few well-placed buckles. Any money saved on clothing the brutes had clearly gone toward paying for the enormous maces they brandished. I work hard to ignore my urgent need to flee. Then two of the guards approach me, and I'm too petrified to run, even if I wanted to.



Sunhome, Fortress of the Legion | Art by: Martina Pilcerova

"Ossett Weslyn? You are wanted for questioning," one guard says to me, a giant, his thumb and forefinger large enough to encircle the girth of my bicep.

"Wait, what? This is about the Baas Solvar case file? See, I thought it might be problematic, but I wasn't sure, and I didn't have enough time to really, and, and "

"You're suspected in the acute poisonings of Sergeant Embrel Skormak, Second Lieutenant Devin Sidian, and Guildmage Rook Atalay."

My boss, my boss's boss, and her boss. I shake my head. "No, that wasn't me. I would never! Tell them, Aresaan, that I couldn't—" I turn around, looking for Aresaan, but she's nowhere to be found. Figures. "Aresaan!" I scream out. She's an angel, so I know she can hear me call her name. Unless they'd stripped that power from her as well.

Another guard, a minotaur wearing her weight in gold-trimmed armor, pats me down and empties my pockets. There's my coin purse. She opens it, pulls out my invitation to the dinner and the missing angel piece. She sniffs the game piece, twists it, and the top starts to screw apart from the bottom. There's liquid inside. "Some kind of Golgari poison, all right. A few drops would bring down a giant, easy." She holds it further away from her, screws it back up.

“That’s not mine, I swear!”

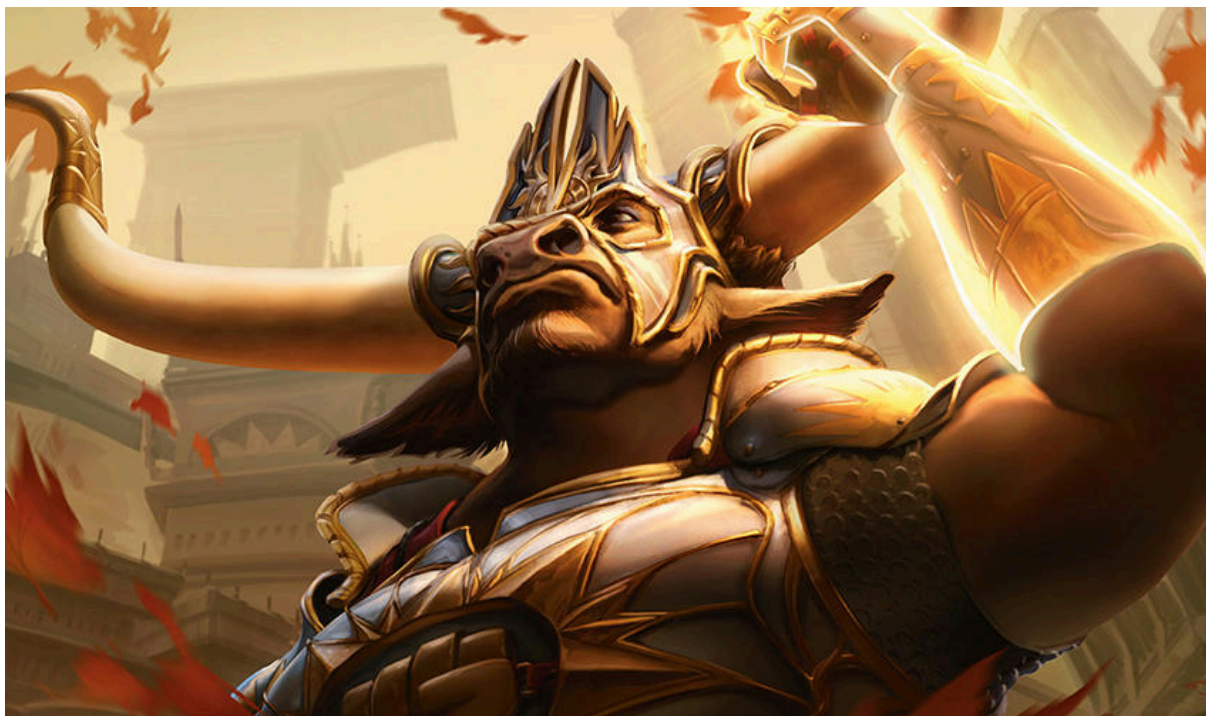
“You’re saying I won’t find your prints all over it?” she asks me.

“No! Well, yeah. I touched it. I was playing Clans & Legions. But I had no idea there was poison inside it!”

“Says the heifer with blood all over her hands,” the giant bellows, pushing me forth. The minotaur shoots him a displeased glance, but he misses it. “Two good leaders died because of you. I suppose you have an alibi of where you were during the ceremony yesterday? Someone who could vouch for you? Maybe your opponent?”

“No, he’s “ I bite my lip. “See, I was invited to the ceremony, but the invitation wasn’t an invitation, you see? It was really a coded message to meet with an informant. See how the watermark is inverted, and the sunburst has one extra ray?”

The minotaur holds the invitation up. “Looks like the normal symbol to me. Left-handed fist. Nine rays.”



Integrity // Intervention | Art by: Ben Maier

I shake my head. “That can’t be right. I saw it!” I squint, but as hard as I try, that thing in my brain that brought order to chaos is gone. It’s nothing but a standard invitation on Boros letterhead. “I didn’t do it. There is a traitor among us!”

My mind feels so twisted up now, but I do know there are three high-ranking vacancies, and Boros always promotes from within. Which means the true killer will rise higher within the guild.

Then it hits me, all at once—Aresaan. She’d been standing there when I read the invitation that wasn’t an invitation. She could have enlisted the help of a Dimir mind-mage to bend my brain to see something that wasn’t there. She’d bought a Golgari elixir on the black market and had conspired with that Gruul child to steal my coin purse, then then just now she could have put it back when she’d run into me. Who knows how deep her allies stretched, spanning guilds, spanning decades. Who knows how long she’d been hatching this plan, waiting for the right time. Boros Legion has been so obsessed with order lately, more so than usual. You can’t walk a block without seeing a soldier in full furs and armor,

can't go a weekend without a parade honoring the accomplishments of a garrison that had dominated on the battlefield. They try harder and harder to project solidarity and strength, and I can't help but think of how vulnerable to chaos we really are—how one spurned angel hellbent on working her way back up to Parhelion had set me up, and then, then

And, and and wait.

The web of possibilities spreads out in my mind, like all the combinations of Clans & Legions games. Games could go on forever, but most games were fast, uncomplicated. Instead of focusing on the chaos, I need to focus on the order. I look at the three-move game. The easiest explanation.

"Wait, you said that there were three poisonings, but two deaths?" I ask the giant.

He scowls down at me. "Sergeant Skormak was lucky to survive. A dozen shamans worked him over well into the night."

"You're saying the poison killed a minotaur and a giant, but not a flame-kin?"

"Maybe death elixirs don't work so well on flame-kin, I don't know."

Hmmm. Probably wouldn't work well on someone who wasn't truly alive in the first place, someone who should have flamed out years ago. That wouldn't stop the outpouring of compassion, though. They'd let him rest up, just to be sure he was okay, but he'd be back in the office all that sympathy and no one would think twice about promoting him. He'd make his way into Sunhome, with a nice cushy job. But no way could he have done this himself. A flame-kin outside of the battlefield would draw too much attention. He needed someone who could walk around the city, unnoticed. Someone people were used to seeing on the streets.



Art by: Wesley Burt

I look at the minotaur, those big furry hands that could wield huge bludgeons also seemed delicate enough to plant a coin purse in my pocket. I look down at her boots. Dark brown leather, tan splotches from hydra spit. She'd been to the bunker. She'd killed Brazer.

"You!" I say. "Skormak is behind this and he poisoned himself to escape the blame. You're in collusion with him!"

The giant balks at the accusation of his fellow guard and handles me rougher. "Maybe you should keep your mouth shut until you meet with your counsel." He pushes me forward.

"You have to believe me. She's a killer," I plead with him. I'm not sure if they're working together, but it's worth a shot. "Skormak framed me so he could move up to Sunhome. And your partner here is in on it. Maybe you are, too."

The minotaur stomps her hoof. "I would never do something so honorless!"

"If you have proof, the truth will be discovered," the giant says.

"You take me to Wargate and no one will ever hear from me again. Look! Look, there's spit from the hydra at the bunker where I met my informant." I point to my boots. "The pattern is the same on her boots. And there's dust on her uniform."

"There's dust on your uniform," the minotaur says. "There's dust on my uniform. There's dust on his uniform " she says, pointing to her partner.

"Yes, but your dust it's from the Rubblebelt—a very specific part where it butts up against Tenth District."

"That'll be tough to prove, won't it," the minotaur gloats, "with you being locked up in Wargate?"

"No one is going anywhere," says a voice. It's Aresaan. She's back, probably because she felt guilty about abandoning me. Or more likely, she couldn't stand to miss watching my career flame out in such an amazing spectacle. "You're sure what you're saying is true, Ossett?"

"I'm sure. I didn't do what they're saying I did, Aresaan. You know me."

"I can prove it, then," she says, waving her hands in the air, gathering white flames into her palms. She aims a ball of fire at the minotaur. It surrounds her, not quite touching. Maybe Aresaan's sob story about being a fallen angel hadn't been quite all true. Her magic is strong. It's imbued with a healing spell, and instead of turning the guard to ashes, the dust from her uniform coalesces into the shape of a dragon. The dusty figure writhes like an apparition. "Rubblebelt dust, high concentration of dragon bone," she says, confidently.

"Care to explain?" I say to the guard.

"I just it's a—" the minotaur stammers. The iron head of the giant's mace is pointed at her, glowing fire-hot now, like it just spent twenty minutes in the forge.

She throws the angel game piece down, and it breaks into two, death elixir spreading upon the ground. Aresaan blasts it with another fire spell, and the liquid vaporizes before it can affect us. When we regain our composure, the spy is gone.

"We must not let her get away!" Aresaan says.

"She isn't who we're after," I say. "It's Skormak. He's behind this."

And the way Aresaan looks at me, there are no traces of doubt. I've earned the trust of an angel, and even though we will never be true equals, she sees me as close enough to one, now. She was beautifully radiant before, but she grows into something else right before my eyes, absolutely frightening to behold. Razor wire crumbles as she flexes her wings against it, and finally she stretches wing-tip to wing-tip, like a yawn decades overdue. The white feathers are long and delicate, but the power hidden beneath them cannot be denied.

"I misjudged you, Wojek. Come with me, and we'll see this through. If there is a spy among us, it is our duty to restore justice." I grab her arm and am enveloped into her being. She flaps her wings, and the world speeds past us. When her feet finally hit the ground again, we're back in Annex Four, standing at Skormak's desk. He's there also, packing up his belongings.

"Getting ready to move offices?" I ask. He jumps and the flames on his head flicker.

"You're looking fit and well for someone who nearly died," Aresaan says, standing behind me. She's actually letting me take the lead on this.

"Annex Four wasn't good enough for you, was it?" I say. "You wanted more, and you'd do anything to get it."

“Do you know how many elementals serve in Sunhome? I can count them on one hand.” He holds up three fingers, all aflame. “Three out of *thousands*. Just because we were cast instead of born doesn’t mean we aren’t capable of performing in high ranks. They deny our sentience, they balk at giving us names, but the truth is we’re not uncontrollable zealots and we deserve life past battle.”

“You killed two people,” I remind him. “That’s not what I’d call controllable.”

“Aresaan killed fifteen thousand, and all she got was a slap on the wrist. Double standards. Look around, Ossett. Lies, treachery, injustice. This is what your Legion is founded upon.”

“Wojek Weslyn,” I say.

“What?”

“That’s my title. Use it.”

Skormak laughs. “You wouldn’t even have that title if it weren’t for me, you arrogant heifer.”

The game has reached its rightful conclusion, and I say the line that has given me pleasure since I’d cleared my first Clans & Legions board. “You’re nullified, Skormak.”

He raises a smoldering brow. “Huh—”

I tilt my head, aim my horns, and ram him with all my might. He flies back into the wall, and the papers on his desk ignite. I didn’t think that one all the way through. Maybe it’s the shock of the hit, maybe it was me putting him in his place, but his flames burn less brightly now.

“I got you, Wojek,” Aresaan says. She frees an emergency water elemental from the wall nearby, then aims it at Skormak. The elementals clash, steam fills the office, but soon both the fire on the desk and the fire upon Skormak’s skin extinguish. He smolders like a pinched wick, then dissipates into a pile of wet ashes and charred armor.



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“Thanks, Aresaan,” I say. “Maybe I underestimated you, too.”

“Nah, what you see is what you get.” She shrugs a shoulder, wings clenched tightly behind her, radiance faded back to normal.

I don’t know what she’s planning, or what she’s hiding, but there is definitely more to Aresaan than what she seems. “I guess I won’t be seeing much of you now that you’ll be off to the Wojek Annex,” she says. “Congratulations. For real. You deserve it, Wojek Weslyn.”

I smile, adjust my cord, pinch my medallion. Wojek Weslyn. I’m pretty sure that will never get old.